

van gogh out with me

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by [orphan_account](#)

Summary

"You - was that a *pick up line*?" He asks, taken back, and Dream almost laughs. "I'm about to steal a seventeen million dollar artifact, and your first instinct is to *flirt with me*?"

"I mean, I don't know, why not," Dream smiles, despite being able to list many reasons as to why not.

(Dream, local superhero, attempts to recruit the infamous art thief that keeps slipping away. Clay, local college student, attempts not to fall in love with the waiter who knows an unnatural amount about art.)

Notes

disclaimer: if anyone in this fic expresses any discomfort to being in it, i will gladly delete this and also myself
happy reading!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

the vase

Dream would probably consider himself lucky.

He found luck in quite a few things - finding a twenty dollar bill on the sidewalk every few days, always enough power on his phone when he forgets to charge it the night before, his knives never missing a shot, and his punches always hitting where he wanted them to, etc. That sort of thing. In an argument, Dream would be the first to admit, he was unnaturally lucky.

But right now, if there was ever any ounce of luck in his bloodstream, he's pretty sure he lost it in the burning building behind him.

"Not to say that I'm prone to attracting, like, arsonists, but three in a row is kind of worrying," a girl with big glasses tells Dream when he zones back in for the first time in at least ten minutes, and he does a double take when he registers her words. *Arsonists*. Right. Of course. "Maybe it's because I like candles. Scented ones are nice, you know. For baths."

He tries to blink back to - whatever "conversation" (Dream standing there while she talked his ear off) he was having with the lady he had rescued, while trying to ignore the dull ache radiating from his wrist. One would think, after an extremely difficult task of retrieving half a family and a few pets from a burning building, Dream would be able to maybe *relax* for a few minutes, maybe have a smoothie, whatever, but apparently not, as this lady would *not stop talking* since he swung her down from her apartment eight stories up.

"Should've known Damien was no different," she shakes her head, a disdainful look on her face. "Brought me aconites to our first date. Who brings *aconites*?" The lady huffs. "All men do is disappoint."

"Men are pretty bad," Dream nods, absentmindedly agreeing. Most men were probably not serial arsonists, but in this day in age, no one could really tell anymore.

She seems to realize he is also a man, at that moment. "Oh, you don't count!" The lady chirps, patting where his cheek is underneath the smiley-face mask. "You're a godsend, although you could have also saved my bonsai while you were up there. I forgot to grab it while I was panicking."

Dream blinks. "My bad."

He's really starting to doubt his choice of staying behind with the people he'd rescued. It isn't unlike him to linger until the police finally arrived, just in case anything else occurred, and there isn't much to regret when those minutes of waiting were usually spent by people thanking him and asking a few questions. But seriously, this lady was starting to push it, and the pain aching from his wrist was not helping. He definitely sprained it.

Thankfully, Dream does not need to entertain her any longer when the sound of police alarms become quite loud rather quickly. Really, Dream doesn't understand what the point was anymore when he had already saved everyone, and the fire department had done their job of hosing away the flames. Dream wouldn't be as praised as he is if he was a fifteen-minute-late hero.

When an officer jogs up to the group of now-apartment-less people Dream had stuck with, Dream turns to the lady. "What'd you say his name was again?"

The lady pauses in the middle of her sentence. "Who? My bonsai?"

He tries not to facepalm. “No, the - your boyfriend’s name. You know, the person who set the fire bomb?”

“Oh,” the lady nods in understanding. “Damien Bloomfield, but really, it should be Damien *Boom*-field, if you get what I’m getting at.” She laughs at her own joke, multiple people around her groaning, and doesn’t notice when Dream hurries away.

“Damien Bloomfield is your man,” Dream quickly tells the approaching officer - one he’s familiar with, Phil or something of the like, patting his shoulder with his good hand when he passes. “Also, sixteen minutes late? Must be a world record.”

“Fuck off,” he scowls, and walks over to the crowd, many of who start to complain, and thankfully, no longer pay attention to Dream.

Who *does* pay attention to him are the multiple reporters who climb quickly out of their vans, after following closely with the police cars. Cameras and microphones are almost immediately shoved in his face when he starts to walk away, as well as women and men with loud voices and pressed frown lines. Usually, many watching civilians follow, but the fire bomb had been loud enough to scare away half the street, the other half being smart enough to stay away from a burning, twelve-story building.

“Dream, who do you believe to be behind this terrorist attack?”

“Did you know this was coming?”

“Was this a planned attack?”

“Dream, is it possible the infamous Technoblade is behind this?”

“*Technoblade?*” Dream snorts, adjusting his gloves as he quickened his pace. They were fingerless, sure, defeating all purpose of what gloves are actually for, but they made him look cool, fuck you. “Technoblade wouldn’t attack innocent people. Plus, his crimes are usually creative.”

Their voices collectively get louder, it seems. “Is that to say Techno’s attacks are justified?” A woman in a red skirt with red lipstick asks, flashy eyes when she glares at him.

“Obviously not.” He glares back, although it’s essentially pointless when they can’t see his eyes behind his mask, but it’s the thought that counts. “I don’t support murder. Him and Ranboo covering the entirety of city hall’s floor with ice was kind of funny, though.” More microphones are shoved into his face, and he moves back, grimacing, which they could definitely see.

“Are you a supporter of Technoblade’s actions?” Multiple people chorus at once.

“I - what? *No*, where did you even get that idea?” He exclaims, cringing when the microphones inch closer to him. One of them bumps into his mask, and he almost wishes he was burned alive earlier. “I’m the one who put him in jail! Before he broke out I mean, but still.”

“Dream, did you -”

“How did you -”

“Where is -”

“Who will -”

Hundreds of voices pounce on him after that, and he takes this as a cue to leave as quickly as possible, before he says something worse and gets him in trouble with Wilbur. Although, really, Dream hasn't said anything the people don't know about him already.

"Sorry, I've got to go." He leans away from two more microphones. "My dog," he fumbles, "needs watering. Walking. Close enough," Dream grimaces, ducking under arms as he slips out of the crowd. The cameras attempt to follow him, but Dream has always been too slick to be followed - it's most of the reason why he's able to be a hero in this city, with the police being unable to properly catch up with him; if you can't beat them, join them, they say, and the police took it to heart. It was probably a good thing, just this once.

He slinks behind a dark alley, pouncing onto the top of a dumpster, steady under his shoes, and he climbs atop the roof of a building, gritting his teeth when his wrist screams in pain while he hoists himself up.

He draws his hood up as he peers back to the growing crowd of people, consisting of those that have realized the building is no longer on fire and they've got a chance at being on television. He raises his eyebrows as he watches the same lady with the big glasses chat animatedly into a microphone, the news reporter looking increasingly frustrated, and Dream laughs under his breath.

As he takes a running leap to another building's rooftop, he rolls his wrist and winces. Contrary to popular belief, Dream wasn't a superhero; there was nothing *super* about him. Maybe the ability to never miss a shot was a superpower to others, but to him, it was all calculations. Essentially math in a different form, whatever. He's never been quite *super* in any sense.

A hero, however, he was probably to some people, but he could never bear to title himself that. Dream just wanted to help people.

It's midday, almost two o'clock, his phone tells him when he finally approaches the building where he'd placed his backpack. There's only one new text since his class from this morning, from Sapnap asking for him to buy kiwis when he comes home.

His wrist hurts when he unties his mask from his face, and shoves it into his backpack.

me

why do we need kiwis

neither of us eat kiwis wtf

sapnap

i fucking eat kiwis

He breathes a laugh, and tucks his phone away.

With that, Clay finds his way back home, hopping from rooftop to rooftop.

"Long day?" Bad asks when he's taking Clay's order, notepad in his hand. Clay's head is on the table, which was probably not the best idea. Still, the coolness of the table made him feel better, and he was too lazy to lift his head up. He kind of wants to fall asleep.

"Yeah, sort of," Clay quirks his lips upward, and shoves his hands into the pockets of his jacket. "Just a weird morning, I guess." Jumping into a burning apartment was considered weird, probably. Clay's standards for *weird* were kind of fucked up after becoming Dream.

Bad nods understandingly, because he probably could understand in his own terms. Bad was cool that way. "I know what you mean. Anything to do with the fire this morning?"

Clay quickly plasters a look of concern and shock onto his face. He's definitely perfected the art of acting at this point. He should've gone to Broadway. "What? What fire?"

"You don't know? There was this fire bomb down on sixteenth! Thankfully, no one got hurt since Dream was really quick to get everyone out, but it was a real scare," Bad explains to a man who had already experienced it firsthand. Not that he needs to know that. "Turns out it was some guy who'd gotten mad at his girlfriend's plant obsession."

He hadn't known that bit; Clay had blocked out the lady's voice after she started talking about the many technicalities that came to mating plants. "That's," he pauses, "not too far from what I would expect, actually. This city is so fucking weird."

"Clay, *language*," Bad prods him with his pen, gesturing to a family with three toddlers eating a few booths away. "But I know what you mean. Remember that guy who spray painted the McDonald's logo green last week?"

"Oh, that wasn't even the weirdest from this month," he shakes his head, lightly laughing. They still haven't been able to remove all the paint. "Honestly, I prefer it that way."

"Yeah," Bad agrees. "The green makes it look more calm, I think. Anyways, we're not supposed to discuss other restaurants here, so what would you like today?"

After a quick trip from the grocery store and his apartment shared with Sapnap, Clay had headed to this diner pretty fast, especially after a whole morning gone without breakfast. He ate a few ramen cups around five a.m., however, when he'd been completing his reading for one of his English classes. Maybe that was the life of a college student - living life like he had no idea what a human body needs to function.

Nonetheless, this was familiar; coming after a mission for a late lunch, or an early dinner, and hanging out with Bad while Clay stuffs his face with fries. It might have become a ritual at this point, having started all the way back in freshman year, when Clay had his first fight.

He'd come in, mostly because he had just ran away from someone who: one, he had gotten into a fight with (what was Clay supposed to do, watch the guy mug a girl?), and two, had definitely seen Dream's face. This was also the place he had met Wilbur, who had trailed behind him after watching him return the girl's purse, and offered him a job of saving people. He'd also offered the idea of a mask, which Dream had genuinely not thought of. Seriously, who wore masks, besides, like, Spiderman?

Just a short while after that, Clay had become friends with Bad, who often waited when he came in and gave him discounts on food. He may be a hero of sorts, but he was also a college student (see: desperate for cheap food). Saving people didn't particularly make him rich.

"We get a new guy tomorrow," Bad says when he joins Clay on his break.

"Oh, wow," he swallows a glob of fries, "I just realized that there's only one other waiter."

"Yeah," Bad nods, "business has been picking up lately, so it's been a struggle between just two people." Bad pulls out his own snack, a pack of peanut M&M's, and gestures to Clay's wrist, which he had clumsily bandaged. "What's that about?"

"Ah, nothing." Clay waves it off, smiling easily. "Was helping someone carry their boxes into their

car and I hurt myself.”

Bad chuckles. “Of course you hurt yourself from helping someone. Clay, our own personal hero.” Clay rolls his eyes, and shoves a handful of fries into his mouth.

“It was no big deal.”

There is much to assume about a man like Wilbur Soot.

When Dream had first met Wilbur as Clay - *Clay*, Dream hadn’t been quite formed yet - he was still high from adrenaline, bloody knuckles, and needing to stop at some place that had food and held no one that knew him. Coincidentally, it was the first time he had stepped into the diner, and the same day Clay had met Bad. Dream may be lucky, but that day, Clay had never been luckier.

That’s what he reminds himself sometimes, when he forgets that meeting Wilbur was probably good luck, because at certain times, it was easy to forget.

Like right now.

“Despite the massive dub this morning, we have a new mission for you,” are the first words past Wilbur’s lips, leaned back in his chair as he stares at Dream. His hair is messy in the way that someone would spend hours in front of a mirror to perfect. Wilbur probably woke up like that. Asshole.

“Already?” Dream sighs, exhaustion weighing down his bones. Maybe he did sign up for this, but two years ago he didn’t realize how helpless society really was. The other day, some guy needed help opening his pickle jar, which, although it may be a task achieved by a handful of people on the planet, was *Dream* the one that had to help him? Really? “Is it at least something important? I’ve got an essay coming up.”

“Oh, Dream, you know we only ever save the important stuff for you,” Wilbur tells him sweetly, playing with a pen.

“You called me to kill a spider in your bathroom yesterday,” he replies dryly. Wilbur grins.

“As I said, only the most important missions. Anyhow, we are not here to discuss the priority of this, since time is quite a player in this game.” He scoots closer to his desk, and pulls open a folder - a manilla, plain one, like as if they were in a spy movie or something, *Confidential* stamped on the cover in red. Dream indulges him, and tugs the folder closer.

The words *404* face him when he opens it, in daunting New Times Roman font.

“‘404’? Did your internet go out?” He halfheartedly jokes, looking up from the page to be met with Wilbur’s smug look. “Why are you looking at me like that.”

“I think this is going to cater to your interests,” Wilbur answers, vague and slightly ominous, as he always is. “This is something edgy. Cool, you know, rebellious. Nothing is more rebellious than stealing.”

“Sure,” Dream agrees easily, slowly nodding. He, along with half the population, has dipped into the occasional thievery. Possibly also arson. He was a man from Florida, after all.

“This guy,” he turns the first page, revealing a black and white, blurry shot of a man leaning over

to grab a huge frame of a painting. The room is dark, and his figure is barely traceable, smudged by the lack of light. The words *404* are printed underneath it, and this still does not answer a single question in Dream's head. Wilbur taps the figure with the end of his pen. "This guy is rebellious."

"You want me to catch a robber for you?" Dream questions, squinting at the blurry outline of the man. "You said this was interesting. I caught that one guy last week, the one who stole vintage shoelaces - what the fuck was that, by the way?"

"Dream, I don't want you to *catch* him." Wilbur rolls his eyes, before pausing. "Well, no, I do want you to catch him, but also *convince* him."

This piques Dream's interest.

"To what?"

"Join us." Wilbur's smug expression turns even smugger, if that was possible.

It takes only a few seconds for Dream's mind to connect the dots. He raises his eyebrows. "This guy outsmarted you, huh?"

Wilbur blinks at him, before pink slowly crawls up his neck. "I - *no*, he did not! He's just good, and I thought, well, obviously I *thought* it would be a good idea to have him on our side, considering how easily he slips past security and steals million-dollar art," he fumbles to explain, all while looking like a tomato. Dream huffs a laugh.

"Oh, so it's like recruiting me all over again," he says, attention back to the folder.

"You weren't stealing incredibly pricey art, but sure." Wilbur shakes his head, slouching back in his chair.

"What's up with that name, by the way," Dream cuts in, still flipping through the pages inside the folder. Most just held missing artworks that 404 had stolen, consisting of paintings more than anything else. "'404'? Is that like a bad connection to the WiFi sort of joke or -"

"We are running on his schedule, considering he works for others," Wilbur says, ignoring Dream like he usually does. "He seems to work in a two-week period, which," he says at Dream's skeptical expression, "although it may seem naive to do so, 404 seems to know what he's doing, especially since he still hasn't been caught in the act yet. Coincidentally, it's been two weeks since he last stole something, and we suspect he may try to retrieve one of the more *pricier* artworks this time around." At these words, he flips to another page, in which a stock photo of a vase is printed in color. Dream was a huge fan of art, sure, he had a whole account dedicated to the fanart he gets from time to time, but this -

This just looked like something he'd get from IKEA.

"I don't know what this is."

Wilbur sighs. "Unsurprising. *This* is a vase, bidding up to seventeen million dollars. Not all that pricey, considering some of the past things 404 has stolen in the past, but it's suspected to rise in value exponentially in the next year. It was found back in 2017, actually, but archeologists actually suspect it to have been..."

Dream zones out, like he does sometimes when Wilbur goes on these sort of monologues. Maybe the details sometimes come in handy, but really, he didn't care much about the artwork itself. Any sort of detail that wasn't prevalent to the mission usually went haywire in Dream's head.

He can't get over this guy's name. Was it pronounced *four-o-four* or *four hundred and four*? Not to mention the incredibly bad image of him, there was probably a better picture of this guy somewhere on Google, right? Dream couldn't even make out the man's figure, but then again, he considers, maybe he doesn't need to know what he looks like when trying to find him. Someone trespassing an art gallery in the middle of the night was probably a big enough indicator.

"...but that's not even mentioning the multiple sex parties they probably threw back then." Dream nods along, pretending to have followed every word, but by Wilbur's raised eyebrow, it probably hadn't worked. "You weren't even listening."

"Was too," Dream argues, crossing his arms.

Wilbur stares at him, before giving him a disapproving look. "Nevermind, it doesn't particularly matter right now. I'll be honest, we were never going to actually arrest this man, mostly because thievery isn't in our league, and I'm a huge fan of fun, harmless crime -" Dream often wonders how Wilbur was the leader of a *superhero* league - but the police are on my ass about it since it makes them look bad, but they always look bad," he explains. "Recruiting him is the best next thing, I think. I don't want to arrest him; he's harmless and smart! Personally, I find it fun - apparently, he spray painted dicks on a bunch of Picasso paintings in a museum located in New York, last time!" Wilbur recalls excitedly. "Very fun, indeed."

Dream does remember hearing about that from Bad, after receiving much backlash for not catching this guy when he hadn't even heard of this man until now. He had brushed it off at the time, but now Dream almost regretted it. "Wasn't fun for me - everyone hated me that day. As if I knew anything about it, I can't - I don't even *live* in New York!"

"Not your fault everyone thinks you're involved with criminality," Wilbur says easily. "You've got that mischievous dark-side aura to you, it's very sexy."

Dream blinks. "What?"

"There are a few things we need you to follow if you're going to catch him, however," Wilbur continues, ignoring Dream's panic. "For one, you can't hurt him, because that may waver his willingness to work with us. Unlike the government, we aren't one for threatening persuasion," he makes a face at the thought, and continues. Dream tries very hard to follow.

"Seriously, Wilbur, I've been working here for two years. I know this."

"Tell me once you've completed a mission without hurting anyone," Wilbur asks him, with a look that says he doesn't quite expect an answer.

Dream answers him anyways. "That time that one guy got stuck in a window," he remembers.

Wilbur doesn't look impressed. "You dropped a book on the construction worker that was working on the sidewalk."

Dream grimaces. "I forgot about that." It wasn't *his* fault he dropped a college textbook - it was unnaturally heavy, and why the guy thought using a textbook to get himself out of the window was a good idea was beyond him.

"Another thing," Wilbur continues, and Dream keeps his mouth shut this time, "we need to have him approach *us*, but make it known we want him. As in, let him know we won't arrest him or something of the sort. If he puts up a fight, try not to fight back. Also make sure not to hurt the artwork. Don't get irritated with him. Don't give away your inner thoughts, as he may use those

against you; we actually don't have much on this man, except for that he isn't stealing these for himself. Just - try to be a salesman of this organization to him. A salesman, except less annoying. Try charming."

"Charming salesman, got it," Dream notes, along with the fifty other things Wilbur had listed.

"If you hurt him, I'll hurt *you*," Wilbur reminds him.

"You are literally a stick on legs," Dream says, not unkindly. Maybe a little unkindly.

"I'll hurt you emotionally," Wilbur clarifies, which is much more on-brand for him.

"Oh."

"We suspect him to break into the Meadow Museum tonight, around three a.m., but we want you there by midnight. You'll have no back up, since we want you to be as welcoming as possible while also, of course, making sure the vase doesn't get stolen," Wilbur explains.

Dream pauses. "*Tonight?*"

"Not much time to prepare, but it was a recent decision to have you go after him," Wilbur seems unperturbed, shrugging. "We can give you a quick rundown on some more details when the time comes, but there's not much we can offer. 404 is relatively new, and smart enough to not let any information slip. Do you have any questions?"

Dream would ask why Wilbur would choose *him* as the one to go after this man, 404, but he could probably answer that himself; he was probably the only one who would find this *fun*. He likes having an unnecessary amount of rules, needing to slip between bars to reach the finish line. Dream flourishes where others flounder in frustration, because he was a genius like that.

Just by the description, this would be undoubtedly difficult to do - having to trap a criminal by letting them go, until eventually, they wore down. Recruitment alone was difficult, not to mention when it was a criminal they were recruiting. It was possibly because of the fear of being arrested or caught into a trap that had them shy away from joining their superhero league; oftentimes, they were too scared to ever give in, and it was a difficult job, in how they needed to be eroded into joining. That's mostly why recruitment was a sparse job for many, given to those most patient - and Dream was patient, when it was something worth waiting for.

But to ask if this was something worth waiting for was something Wilbur would not be able to answer for Dream.

He meets Wilbur's gaze when he answers cheerily, "No questions."

It's 2:06 a.m., and Dream is regretting not having brought along a snack, coffee, *something*.

He mournfully thinks back to the fettuccini Alfredo Sappap had made for dinner, how it's sitting in the fridge, just waiting for Dream to return. God, he really should have eaten it when he had the chance - he had assumed that 404 would probably take a few minutes to break in and leave with the vase, but he hadn't considered at *what time*.

So here Dream was, sitting across a seventeen-million dollar vase, fettuccini-less and hungry, when the clock slowly ticks to 2:07 a.m.

The Meadow Museum is rather a prestigious place, as far as art galleries go. It held many notable art pieces, but Dream has never had the time to properly take a look around. He'd been here, once, back in seventh grade for a history field trip, but he'd spent most of that time in the Egyptian section, staring at mummies and jars meant to hold organs.

Maybe now would be the chance to wander these darkened halls, and Dream does have half a mind to do so, almost debating getting up from where he'd been sitting, concentrated on not losing focus on the vase, as if it would vanish right before his eyes. He knows not to move from his spot, however. It wouldn't be smart, especially when 404 could walk in any second.

Still, he *does* want to stretch, and he is in the motion of almost convincing himself to get up when there's a noise.

A noise that he would not have heard if he wasn't properly trained to look for it - the scuff of a boot, just barely noticeable, and nearly covered up by his own breathing. It'd come from the hallway, and is quickly approaching where Dream stood.

Half of him wanted to hide, perhaps surprise them into recruitment, which was stupid, *obviously*, so Dream immediately ditches that idea. He *could* stand his ground - 404, of course, needs to retrieve the vase, and if he was being paid seventeen million dollars or more, any reasonable person would most definitely raise up a fight for the vase, which was quite problematic in the fact that Dream wasn't supposed to fight him.

Dream has a millisecond to prepare himself when a figure walks in.

Even in the dark room, with no proper light to offer any salvation from the bleary blindness that captures his sight, Dream can still make out a faint figure of someone just a few feet away at the entrance of the room. With their figure, a few inches shorter than himself and slight in their narrow build, it would not take much to figure out that it was 404, no matter if the most visual example Dream has was a blurry figure in the dark.

404, who was, strangely enough, wearing obscure, white glasses, big enough to hide more than half his face behind shaded lenses. All Dream could properly make out of his face was a sharp jawline and neat, dark hair atop his head when he walked in, fiddling with the bag on his shoulder.

Okay, charming salesman, Dream reminds himself, *charming salesman. You got this.*

"Good evening," he blurts, because apparently *charming salesman* was some guy from the 1800s. He's awkwardly loud, wincing when his voice cracks. He watches the man freeze for a second, having just stepped into the room and his head looks up from his bag and onto Dream. Even in the dark, Dream can feel his eyes on him through the dark lenses.

"What the hell," 404 says, and Dream nearly does a double take at the accent. He hadn't been expecting a British accent of all things to come out of this man's mouth. Not more than a few milliseconds pass for 404 to get over the initial shock of having an intruder, however, when he deflates and tilts his head to the side. "Oh. It's you."

The statement sounds mundane, as if Dream was some small disturbance, in how 404 sounds not all that surprised or enthused, and some part of Dream is a little bit offended. "That mask is quite creepy in the dark, you know."

"Oh, yeah, I get that all the time," Dream nods, remembering the white mask he has on. "It's really good for catching people off-guard, though."

"I suppose it is," 404 agrees easily, before pausing. "Am I going to have to fight you for the vase?"

Charming salesman. You're not allowed to hurt him. "I'd fight you," Dream begins, and finds his own mouth out of his control when he is unable to stop himself from saying, "but they said not to touch the artwork."

That is not what Wilbur meant by charming, the voice inside his head groans, and Dream wants to smack himself when he watches 404 falter, mouth slightly agape as he stares back at Dream. His shock is much more amusing than he had expected, his whole body seemingly freezing.

"I - what?"

"What?"

404 shakes his head. "You - was that a *pick up line*?" He asks, taken back, and Dream almost laughs. "I'm about to steal a seventeen million dollar artifact, and your first instinct is to *flirt with me*?"

"I mean, I don't know, why not," Dream smiles, despite being able to list many reasons as to why not. "The accent is pretty attractive."

"I am literally a criminal."

Dream grins. "And what?"

"What is going *on*," 404 mumbles, running a hand through his hair. If he didn't have the glasses on, Dream would assume his eyes would be jumping from the vase to Dream, with how he seems to be considering his options. "I was prepared for fighting not - not whatever tactic this is." He gestures to the general proximity of Dream with a hand.

"We *can* fight if you really want to," he offers, getting into position.

"No, no, I'd rather not!" 404 quickly shakes his head. "I'll just be taking the vase and heading on my own way." He steps closer to the vase, barely an arm's length away when Dream does the same.

"I mean, we might have to fight if you take this, though." He swipes the vase off the stand it sat on, nearly dropping it when it found to be much heavier than he had anticipated. "You're cute and all, but I can't just let cute boys get away with crime like that."

"*Cute boys*?" 404 sputters. "You don't even know what I look like -"

"Sometimes you just know," Dream tries not to laugh when 404 seems to be at a loss of words. "But, you know, it's seventeen million dollars, you understand," Dream nods, holding the vase protectively with both hands. 404 frowns, and steps closer.

"It's also my rent, so consider that," he counters, and reaches out. "Besides, what's this vase going to do here besides collect dust while pretentious people ogle at it all day? The vase would be in much better hands with my client."

Dream raises his eyebrows. "Your client, huh? What're they going to do with it?"

404 shrugs. "I don't know. Put flowers in it, probably. Hand it over." He makes grabby hands to the vase, and Dream jumps away.

"No can do," Dream sighs, holding the vase away from his body and away from 404.

He steps closer, and now Dream can faintly make out the color of his shirt - dark blue sweater, white collared shirt tucked underneath, 404 is dressed like a casual college student, not a prioritized art thief. With the goggles, the accent, and the fit, Dream was continuously becoming a little more surprised with each new finding. "I thought you guys didn't care about stuff like this."

"We don't, but we do care about *you*," he smirks, and watches the only part of 404's exposed face, being his mouth, react as he pauses. It falls open for a second, before he quickly shuts it, frown lines growing evident.

404 retracts his hand. "Excuse me?"

"I mean, you damaged almost thirty million dollars worth in paintings a few weeks ago, stole much more without being caught, and the only evidence of you existing is a blurry photo from a security camera three years ago, which is impressive to some of us," Dream explains, and 404 seems to be properly listening, having stepped away from the vase and from him.

"Some of us'? Not impressive to you?" 404 crosses his arms.

Dream grins. "Stealing always seemed to be a beginner's level thing to me, really."

"Steal a van Gogh painting and then come back to me," 404 challenges.

He pretends to think about it, before shaking his head. "Nah, I've got to pass. Got to hold up my title as one of the good guys, you know? Which, might I add, is much better than being one of the bad guys," he adds smoothly, because he was just that Smooth. Seriously, he's doing a pretty great job of selling this to 404, he's got to be. He's absolutely drowning in Dream's charm, surely.

"Which I suppose I am." 404's fingers lightly tap against his own arm as he stares at Dream. It's slightly intimidating, being stared down while not being able to see his eyes. That's probably how most people feel when they meet Dream. "Is this you trying to recruit me?"

"Is it working?" He asks hopefully, and 404 snorts. His watch goes off, and Dream watches him turn it off, not sparing it a thought.

"Absolutely not. You're real shit at this, definitely worse than the other guy."

Dream mentally files away to ask Wilbur about *the other guy*, and groans. Goddamn it. "I thought I was doing pretty good. You seem interested enough."

404 hums, before a small smirk lifts his lips. He leans closer, tilting his head when he says in the most gravelly voice, "In you, maybe."

Dream startles, not having expected that at *all*. "I - you - what?" He stutters, blinking rapidly. "What?"

As fast as it had happened, he leans away, seemingly satisfied as a prideful smile stays on his lips. "Just kidding. Thanks for the vase."

"What?" Dream repeats for possibly the nine-hundredth time, before looking down at his hands, which were, shockingly, empty of a seventeen-million dollar vase. "What the fuck," he says, loud in the suddenly empty room when he looks up, where 404 was absent.

The hallway was, disappointingly, dark and empty of any art thieves when Dream runs out of the

room, head turning as he looks for 404, who has supposedly vanished into thin air, as far as he was concerned. There was no trace of him, not even a sound when Dream quickly rushed through the art gallery.

One would suppose an open window to clue him in, or the sound of shoes against the marble floor, but there is nothing at all as Dream hurries to find 404, because that was *ridiculous*. What kind of shitty romance movie move even *was* that, he can't even -

When Dream confirms that, yes, a seventeen-million dollar vase just left his possession because he had thoroughly panicked, he takes a long moment to sit down on the floor across a Greek statue of a beheaded lady, and reconsider his job.

“What the *fuck*,” Dream emphasizes, and almost, just a little, dies inside.

the AI

Chapter Summary

"I propose giving up. Maybe then you won't go home covered in bruises," 404 suggests.

He can't help it when he asks, "What kind of bruises?"

Chapter Notes

CW!!! VERY VERY MILD VIOLENCE: only mentionings them throwing office supplies at each other! nothing gory or bloody, dont worry, if u would like to skip, it starts from "404 advances." to "He moves away instinctually, flinching..."

hello:) thank u all for the very kind words and kudos on the first chapter, i was and still am blown away !!

i hope u enjoy this chapter just as much! happy reading ^^

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The moon is absent company when Clay tucks away his mask.

His cheeks are warm despite the night chill when he shoulders his backpack, eyelids heavy. After spending nearly an hour and a half being debriefed (read: being *laughed at*) by Wilbur, Clay was tired enough to simply sleep on the side of the sidewalk; he's done it before, and he was prepared to do it again.

His screen glows awake, clock reading to be nearly six a.m., and a part of him accepts his oncoming death for his eight a.m. class. Of course he just *had* to pick an early class - it was Statistics, too. Clay doesn't know anything about Statistics. No one does.

Half of him debates heading straight home and catching a possible half-hour nap before his class, but his stomach growls unnaturally at the reminder of his missed dinner. He could risk a quick nap for a good meal, and head straight to his class, probably, although there's no real debate, his stomach making the decision for him. He is always weak for food. And also flirty art thieves, apparently.

Clay's legs, aching, seemingly have a mind of their own when they bring him to the familiar diner, stepping into the dimly lit building and bell jingling behind him.

"I'll be right with you," an unfamiliar voice calls from behind the counter, hidden away in the kitchens. It doesn't sound like Skeppy, the other waiter who usually worked during night shifts, and it definitely wasn't Bad, who often fell asleep on his feet before reaching midnight, because apparently he has what the people call a "normal sleep schedule" and a "healthy lifestyle".

There's no one else in the diner, thankfully, Clay not wanting to have others bear witness to the mess that he definitely is at the moment. Besides, the only people that ever walked into a diner after three a.m. were murderers, insomniacs, and the occasional normal person. Clay wasn't sure

where he fit in that spectrum, at the moment - not to say that he's ever killed anybody.

He takes a seat in his normal booth, setting his bag beside him as he rubs his eyes, burning behind his palms. The smell of greasy fries and the usual city pollution was almost comforting when he tries to forget about whatever happened a few moments ago.

God. What *was* that, with the - the leaning in, and the gravelly voice, and the unnaturally flustered reaction that Dream had had, and how 404 had just *slipped* past him -

"Hello, may I take your order," a voice pulls him out of his own head, and a strike of panic hits Clay's chest when his head whips up, somewhat worried that 404 had somehow followed him.

When he looks up, however, he is greeted with a somewhat bored-looking college student, dark eyebrows and dark eyes flat as he waits patiently for Clay to respond. Some part of his mind that isn't completely enamoured remembers Bad mentioning getting a new hire, and he blinks. Looking good in fluorescent lights was an impossible task, yet here was this guy, clad in a black and purple sweater underneath a slightly stained apron, seeming like he'd rather be anywhere else and still looking good. Really good.

"Sir?"

"I," Clay blinks back, having zoned out, and blushes in embarrassment. His seemingly only purpose is to prove how socially incapable he is, tonight. "Sorry, I'm a little out of it," he lightly laughs, rubbing the back of his neck, and the waiter raises his eyebrows, as if to say, *yeah, I can tell*. "I'll just have a small fries, and maybe a burger too, if that's okay."

The waiter makes a small noise of confirmation and turns away, all while Clay makes a face to himself. *If that's okay?* One good looking guy and suddenly he was asking permission for his meal.

His phone offers no proper entertainment when he pulls it out, the rest of the world dead because they weren't also being chased down and being embarrassed by high maintenance art thieves, since Dream is special that way.

That's not to say he was complaining; at least life was never boring, right? Maybe a little tiring, like right now, but Clay didn't - Clay has never regretted being Dream. He doesn't think he ever will.

Thankfully, there's no distraction needed when Clay receives his food just a few minutes later. The waiter smoothly places a plate of food in front of him, as well as a complimentary water.

"Will there be anything else?" He's lightly tapping his fingers against the silver platter when he looks at Clay, waiting.

Clay shakes his head, and a few strands of hair fall into his eyes. "No, thank you."

"No problem, just call me over if you need anything," the waiter offers a polite smile, corners quirking upward as he walks away, and Clay looks away before he catches himself watching.

Clay usually tries to savor food, but his stomach is entirely empty and the food is too appetizing to not attempt to shove the entire burger into his mouth in one go. The only thing stopping him, however, was the presence of the pretty waiter, and the threat of also possibly dying by choking.

As he chews, his mind wanders to 404. Embarrassment holds a tight grip on his chest every time he thinks about what had happened; 404 left with the vase so quickly, and Dream hadn't expected it at all. He'd have to see 404 again, certainly, considering the *next time* Wilbur had mentioned during

debriefing. Some side of him almost wanted to quit right then, confess that the humiliation of being too flustered to react was too much, but Dream has always been too stubborn for his own good, or ego.

Clay is submerged, complatative in his own thoughts as he pays for his meal, going through the robotic motions. He smiles politely to the waiter as he leaves the diner, bell jingling in his wake when he walks out.

The sun peeks out from the horizon when his phone buzzes.

sapnap

did you faint out of fear in the middle of a mission again where are u

me

heading to class

and it was one time okay there was a SNAKE

sapnap

it was a walking stick you coward

Clay suppresses a chuckle in order to not look crazy laughing to himself, and tucks his phone away. It wasn't unlike Sapnap to check up on him after missions, especially when he didn't stop by afterwards.

Quickly, though, his stomach fills with dread when he remembers Sapnap asking about his new mission earlier that day; he'll ask how the mission went, surely, and would absolutely *revel* in Clay's embarrassment. He won't hear the end of it, as far as Sapnap was concerned.

His entire Statistics class is spent as Clay tries to figure out how to explain that he had lost a seventeen-million dollar vase to his own gay panic *without* being laughed at.

“You *what*?”

Clay groans into his hands, trying his best to cover his warming cheeks as Sapnap laughs at him, nearly choking as he gasped for air. Today could have been a good day if his morning wasn't spent being ridiculed because he got flustered; he *panicked*, okay, and anyone would if a criminal with a nice voice talked to them like that.

“It's not that funny,” Clay scowls, rubbing his face as he looks up from his hands.

“It's,” Sapnap couldn't contain himself as he leaned over, toppling over onto his side on the couch as he giggled, “it's *so* funny, oh my God, Clay, *dude*, oh my *God*. ”

Really, Clay does appreciate the fact that he could go to Sapnap, one of his closest friends, for superhero-related crises such as this. He appreciates it when he could nap on their sofa, bloody and bruised, without having to explain himself after a fight, or when he could disappear for hours for a mission without explanation and no questions, and he appreciates it when Sapnap offers comfort and hours of simply doing *nothing* when Clay comes back from a failed mission.

Clay appreciates Sapnap, he swears he does, but right now - not so much.

“You disaster,” he hiccups through his laughter, and he slowly heaves in a deep breath as he tries

to calm down. "This is the best day ever. That - by a *twink*, too, holy shit, bro."

"I just cost the museum seventeen-million dollars," Clay complains. "Have some compassion."

Sapnap forces himself to sober up at that. "Yeah, okay, you want compassion, I got compassion. I am so compassionate." He clears his throat, a smile still threatening to burst onto his face. "What did Wilbur say?"

Wilbur had laughed the same way Sapnap had, nearly falling out of his chair while Dream stood in front of his desk, off-put and frown on his face - he wasn't going to tell Sapnap that, though. The losing-an-ancient-art-piece wasn't exactly a worry to Wilbur, apparently, because most of the debriefing was focused on 404 himself ("What did he look like?" Wilbur had asked, eager. "Did he want to fight? Did he give away anything? Did he look interested - why are you blushing? What? *What?*").

"He just told me to look forward to the next time I meet him," he mutters, sighing. "I couldn't - I didn't even expect it! He just leaned in and -"

"- and whispered into your ear very sexily, we *get* it." Sapnap ignores the furious flush crawling up Clay's face. "You think you're gonna stick with the recruit mission?"

He chews on his lower lip, thinking. Half of him is too embarrassed to want to face 404 again, some of his ego almost bruised with how easily he had gotten away, the cockiness in his voice when he'd leaned away. God, how Clay didn't even realize the vase was out of his hands was lost on him, and he cringes at the memory, but.

But there was some sort of fun to be had when Dream had playfully teased (see: flirted) with 404, with the way the other man had sputtered and gone flustered every time. There is also the inevitable satisfaction of recruiting 404 in the end, no doubt, because if Dream continues with this mission, he is *definitely* not going to give up.

"I'm gonna stick with it," Clay confirms, determination settled onto his face. "Fucked up the first time, I won't fuck up again."

"If that's foreshadowing," Sapnap says, "I want it to just cut here, and then, like, a compilation of you fucking up again the next time you see him. Please."

Almost like the universe was out to get him, Dream fucks up again.

It's two weeks later when Dream is once again in an art gallery - one a little ways away out of town, and rather new, in terms of reputation. It had opened just a few years ago, as Wilbur had explained it, and held more technology-centered art pieces for everyday use.

Dream had absolutely no clue what that meant, but he thinks he gets it when he walks in at exactly 10:45 p.m. on Thursday night. Whatever schedule 404 was working on was *not* working for Dream - why it had to be on the night right before a major exam was beyond him. In all honesty, he was willing to turn around and leave, and let whatever 404 wanted to steal simply get away.

The art gallery is filled with a rather niche criteria of art - sculptures and art pieces in which they serve as more than visual appeal. There is some sort of sculpture which doubled both as a marble statue and a bookshelf, and is quite impressive. One of the more alarming ones was a rather phallic shaped model, where the plaque underneath it simply read *Coffee Pot*. Dream knows better than to

be curious.

Nevertheless, these were not the ones that Dream had been sent to rescue from potential art thieves.

404 is, apparently, targeting one of the newer creations that is yet to be revealed to the public eye - one of the more up-and-coming artists as of late, with an art piece that was also an AI robot of sorts. Dream, personally, did not see the appeal because anything that had to do with artificial intelligence thoroughly freaked him out, alright, he's *seen* Black Mirror.

It's 2:09 a.m., as told by the clock, and Dream spins in the office chair as he waits. The AI thing was here, completely unguarded, which was stupid, being that it definitely cost more than Dream's entire upper half body. Maybe also a leg.

The case that held it was quite big, too, completely unmissable, and some part of him wonders how in the hell 404 was going to swerve past Dream this time and leave with a five foot case that weighed more than Dream, and definitely more than 404, if his narrow build was anything to go by.

The case itself is intimidating, made simply out of glass. Dream kept flinching every time he looked over at the unnerving, human shape of the AI, which stares blankly in front of itself, out the see-through glass case. In all honesty, Dream did not understand the appeal for the glorified Roomba.

From the small bits of information Dream had actually listened to from Wilbur, he was pretty sure the case was a charging station as well, hooked to a big, metal machine attached to the bottom. There was a small pad for the artist's thumbprint to unlock the case, glowing faintly in the dark.

Dream has a pile of pens in front of him, throwing them up in the air to see if they'd stick in the ceiling. He's got more than half of them in the ceiling, and throws his eighth one when the door swings open. Dream startles, hurrying to stand up and turn to the doorway, where 404 stood.

"Hello," 404 greets, just as a pen falls from the ceiling and hits Dream in the face as revenge.

He brushes it off, and clears his throat. "Fancy seeing you here."

"Are you here to try and stop me again?" He seems entirely uninterested, just like the first time, arms crossed and watch ticking on his left wrist. The dim lighting of the gallery offers much more to the eye this time, where beforehand, 404's features blended into each other with the darkness that the unlit art gallery offered, but the lighting that leaks in from the hallway allows much more to be exposed.

He's incredibly pale, actually, now that Dream looks at him a little longer, like he's never seen the sun before. Anything above his nose was entirely unidentifiable, and his lips were downturned as he stared right back at Dream. He wouldn't be able to tell him apart from any other white guy in a line up, if he was to be entirely honest.

"Also to recruit you," Dream says, and watches 404 scoff. "What? You're pretty impressive, you know."

"Of course I know, but last time I checked, you weren't quite impressed with my beginner's level thievery."

Dream can't help but grin at the memory. "I'm a changed man."

404 tilts his head. "Are you?"

"Most definitely. I - my outlook on the world has changed completely," he nods. "I now see how respectable robbery is, as far as crime goes. I'd like to issue a formal apology, actually, to you. Wrote it in my notes app and everything."

Pride erupts in Dream when 404 laughs, marking it as progress for recruitment. "A notes app apology, huh? Must be sincere then."

"Entirely," Dream responds seriously.

"You're kind of ridiculous," 404 observes. "I don't know how anyone is a fan of yours. It must be the superhero charm."

"Nah, that's just me." Dream smirks, and moves to the side of the desk, leaning against it. He's hyper aware of the AI case behind him, and the way 404 was definitely eyeing it behind his goggles. He wonders how 404 was able to see anything in the dark with them on.

"Yes, because you're absolutely oozing with charm," 404 quips dryly, walking closer to the case. To anyone else, it might have been entirely casual, but Dream knew better, with the faux laid-back posture 404 had forced unto himself.

"Never say oozing again, but yes." Dream shifts his weight to the heels of his feet, and readies himself, before pausing. He technically wasn't supposed to fight 404, so he'd need to figure out a way to both protect the case *and* recruit 404 without also letting him get away with robbery. "I'm quite the charmer."

"I'm sure, with how well you're doing with recruiting me." His watch goes off, and Dream watches with careful eyes as 404 turns it off with nimble fingers. He'd done that last time, he remembers, a seed of anxiousness settling into his stomach.

Some sort of plan devises itself in Dream's head as 404 slowly inches closer to the case, oddly having given up on trying to hide it. Dream raises an eyebrow, and steps toward the other man. "There's no way you'd be able to carry this out of here."

404 advances. "Maybe I could," he counters, a Cheshire smile stretching across his face when he suddenly bolts towards the case.

They both leap in the same direction at the same moment; 404 jumps back as Dream comes after him, startling when he narrowly dodges an arm. "What the *fuck*," he expresses, slightly surprised at the audacity.

"I'm not supposed to fight you, but I'm also not going to just - just *let* you steal this," Dream laughs.

"Well, you should," he mutters, ducking underneath Dream's arm as he tries again. He kicks at his legs, and Dream barely dodges, stepping away and toward the case. They both move closer to the case as Dream slowly backs up, trying his best to block every punch thrown his way. 404 steps to the right, and Dream follows, until they do an awkward dance in front of the AI, the sound of their shoes against the floor.

"Oh my God, *move*," 404 groans, shoving Dream to the side, frustrated. He pulls the office chair close, running Dream over with it and into a bookshelf, hitting against his back painfully. He shouts in alarm when Dream throws a bookshelf his way, heavy textbook thudding heavily against the wall. "You are a moron," he says it like a fact, and maybe it is. "This is an awful way to recruit

me."

"Yeah? What do you suggest?" Dream pushes the office chair out of the way, and narrowly blocks a kick to his stomach with another book, wincing when it presses against his body forcefully.

"I propose giving up. Maybe then you won't go home covered in bruises," 404 suggests, grabbing the book when Dream nearly slams it against his head. They push the textbook against each other, until Dream somehow tangles them toward the desk, where he swiftly pushes and lets go of the book, 404 stumbling into the wall. Dream huffs a breath as he pushes the desk against 404 and the wall, trapping him.

He can't help it when he asks, "What kind of bruises?"

It's completely deserved when 404 pushes the desk away, toppling it over and nearly landing on Dream's feet. The wood painfully dents into his fingers when he holds it, inches away from crushing his boots, and he lifts it back up, watching it crash into the floor, papers flying away.

"Why would you say that," 404 stammers, pink cheeks when he turns away to the case. Dream is not far behind, pulling him away, closer to himself, and groans when 404 elbows him in the stomach.

"That *hurt*," he exclaims, being pushed away.

If 404 had his goggles off, Dream would probably guess he was rolling his eyes underneath them. "See, that could have been prevented if you had just let me go."

"Why are your elbows so sharp," Dream squawks, hurriedly reaching for 404 again and pushing him into the office chair, rolling him away. He grabs the tape dispenser discarded on the cluttered floor, half a mind to simply tie 404 to the chair. 404 swivels for a second before getting back up on his feet, a frown on his face.

He throws a pencil holder at Dream, who steps aside, smug. "Running out of options, are we?"

"I'm never out of options." 404 grabs a purple stapler from the floor, and some part of Dream is almost threatened.

He thinks. He could simply push 404 out of the window and be done with it, but Wilbur would probably be quite disappointed, and it probably wouldn't help with recruiting the art thief. He *could* attempt to tie him up, but there was nothing to properly tie him up with, besides the roll of tape. Then again, there were also wires, miles long, attached to the case.

If he could somehow tie up 404 without hurting him, Dream could probably protect both the case *and* get away with abiding Wilbur's rules.

He makes a quick decision as he dodges a swing from 404, stapler headed straight for his face. His life flashes before his eyes as he jumps back.

"I'm not going to die by a *fuchsia* colored stapler," Dream yelps, grabbing 404's wrist when he directs the stapler at Dream again. Some terrible part of him notes how *thin* his wrists are, and is punished for his thoughts by a different stapler coming his way, this time blue colored. He appreciates the sentiment.

"Die by a blue one, then," 404 huffs when he tugs his wrist out Dream's hand, fuchsia stapler dropping and clattering against the ground. Dream stumbles back and grabs at the wires attached to the case, stuck into an electric socket in the wall. 404 recoils when Dream looks at him.

“Stay away from me,” 404 warns, stepping closer to the case. Dream opposes him from the other side of the AI, wires in hand.

“Maybe if you give up and join our league,” he offers, and 404 makes a disbelieving noise.

“You’re *fighting* me, and you expect me to join your league?”

“I’m only fighting you because you’re stealing,” Dream whines. “It doesn’t count.”

He steps to the right. 404 steps to the left. “You’re pretty insufferable.”

Dream moves to the left, and 404 moves to the right, faltering when Dream takes his lead. He pauses, frown lines on his face when he seems to stare at Dream for a second, considering his options. He takes a step to the right. Dream does the same.

“Nowhere to go,” Dream sings.

“Maybe,” 404 mutters.

Something in 404 must have found a way out, however, when he runs to the right, Dream following. He makes to swerve under his arms, swearing when Dream pulls 404 in any way, grabbing his right hand and pushing him against the glass. The art thief tries to twist away as Dream ties the wire around his wrist.

404, strangely, does not give up much of a fight after a few seconds, and Dream looks up in confusion to see the blue stapler coming directly at him.

He moves away instinctually, flinching, facing the other way until the sound of glass cracking has him look, where the stapler has been shoved into the fingerprint scanner. They both freeze, a few seconds passing until 404 laughs and Dream groans.

Dream ties 404 to the office chair, ignoring the other’s complaints. “You just damaged something worth more than either of us, you deserve to be tied up,” he scowls, ignoring the obvious innuendo when 404 snorts.

“I have nothing left to *do*. Might as well let me go,” he points out. “It’s not like I can carry that thing out right now.” He attempts to move his hands, where both wrists have been tied to the office chair’s arms, sighing when neither budge. “Why are you weirdly good at tying knots,” he looks at Dream, who stares at the broken glass pad.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” he replies easily. 404 falls quiet at that, and Dream muffles a snicker.

On the surface level, there would be no easy way to simply walk out with the AI in 404’s hands, with it being a few inches taller than 404 himself and weighing enough to make it difficult to carry. That was not to mention the fact that Dream would be chasing 404 the entire time, making the heist much more difficult than the other cases.

With him breaking the pad, it would leave the AI completely vulnerable for at least a few hours while the glass lock would be repaired, or if the AI is moved to a new case. That period of time would be perfect for 404 to slip in and steal at a later time, when Dream would definitely be unable to help, being that tomorrow is a Monday morning, infamous for being the one day when Dream never makes an appearance, because Clay reserves Mondays for catching up on work.

This was so specifically planned out, unlike the robbery of the vase, and Dream is almost

impressed. "Wait, you -"

He turns to an empty office chair, with one wire discarded on the floor. 404's laughter echoes from the hallway.

Sighing, Dream doesn't attempt to follow.

The diner is empty when Clay steps in, tired and body aching.

The trip from the art gallery out of town to Wilbur's office a few miles away stole enough time from the night for the sky to be a blossoming pink when Dream finally takes off his mask. There was no bargaining for a nap, hunger festering in Clay's stomach since he had left Wilbur's office. The fight had burned off his dinner, alright, he deserves another meal.

All Clay feels, besides exhaustion, is grateful that he had no morning classes, his only class of the day being at three in the afternoon, and giving him enough time to grab a bite and head home, where he'll take a long, long shower under boiling water. Possibly bother Sapnap for a hug that'll last longer than socially acceptable. Maybe lay on the floor a little.

The bell jingles when Clay opens the door, and the same waiter from a few weeks ago looks up from the register, looking unnaturally good at seven a.m. in the morning. He cringes at the thought of how he probably looked - worn out, tousled hair from his long night, slouched figure out of exhaustion. He consciously straightens his posture at the thought, and runs a hand through his hair. He's pretty sure he's just made it worse.

"I'll be right with you," the waiter tells him, a polite smile on his face as he goes back to counting coins off the counter under his breath. Clay nods, despite the waiter not looking at him anymore, and slips into one of the booths.

He sets his head down in his arms, sighing. Dream is quite acquainted with the more-than-occasional fight, being the local hero and all, yet it never fails to tire him out, especially during the night. Clay has never had a proper sleep schedule, and it's only ever gotten worse from becoming Dream. 404 was also not helping, with all his missions guaranteeing a late night.

Thinking about 404, Clay can admit, he has no plan on how to recruit him. Half of him wonders if it'll even be possible - 404 seems so determined, going as far as to fight him despite not having fought in any of his earlier thefts. Nonetheless, Dream was certainly not giving up any time soon.

He feels worlds away with his head tucked into his arms, his eyes shut as he slowly drifts into his own thoughts. Clay can feel himself slipping away the longer his thoughts slowly muddle together, until he slinks away into a hazy sleep.

"- hope you're not dead or something, I'd rather not lose this job because someone died during my shift -"

Clay blinks awake, raising his head from his arms when he hears a voice attempt to wake him up.

He looks up, blinking blearily at the waiter, a quick three seconds of confusion as to where he is until it clicks. "I," he begins, a blush on his cheeks when he looks at the waiter, who looks relieved that he wasn't dead. "Did - I didn't mean to fall asleep, I'm so sorry," he stumbles to say, sitting up

straight.

“It’s okay,” the waiter reassures while Clay rubs the sleep out of his eyes. “You looked like you needed it.” That somehow makes it worse, the implication of Clay really looking that tired making him blush even harder. “I would let you sleep longer, but I need to lock up for my break.”

“Oh, no, yeah,” Clay clears his throat, hurrying to grab his bag as he gets up. “Thanks for not kicking me out or something.”

“No worries.” He offers a small smile, along with a cup of something dark. “I - here.”

Clay accepts it, the warmth of the cup immediately warming his hands. “What’s this?”

“Coffee; it’s on the house, don’t worry,” he hurries to add, mistaking the look on Clay’s face as one of worry, rather than what really is - utter adoration. Clay is pretty sure he was falling in love, not that the waiter needed to know that. Incredibly good looking *and* nice? This is the reincarnation of Jesus Christ, surely. Although it would be unlikely to meet Jesus in a twenty-four hour diner, but the world has its wonders.

“No, I want to pay for it,” Clay sets the cup on the table, digging around for his wallet and blindly offering the first dollar his fingers land on.

The waiter accepts the bill, albeit a bit hesitant. “I paid for it already, but if you’re sure? I’ll just get your change.”

Clay quickly shakes his head. “No, it’s fine, you can keep the change.” The waiter freezes, and Clay, for a quick second, worries he’s done something wrong.

“This is a forty-seven dollar tip for a three dollar cup of coffee.”

A pause. “I guess it is,” Clay says, as if he had planned for that. At the waiter's raised eyebrow, he adds, “It can be, like, compensation for letting me nap.”

“That’s really not necessary,” the waiter cuts in, eyebrows furrowed.

“I know.” Clay pockets his wallet and picks up the cup from the table. “It would make me feel better about keeping you from your break, though.”

He squints at Clay, before sighing. “If you’re sure.”

Clay nods. “I am.”

“Okay, then,” the waiter smiles brightly, “thanks.”

A weird, warm feeling squirms its way into Clay’s chest when he smiles back, feeling energized despite not having taken a single sip of coffee yet. “No problem.”

“*Dude.*”

Sapnap bursts into Clay’s room the next morning, phone waving in his hand when he holds it in front of Clay’s face. The headline makes him pause.

Newly Installed AI Stolen In the Middle of Reparation; Are Security Guards Any Good?

Clay groans as Sapnap, as well as the rest of the universe, laughs at him.

Some part of him hears 404 laughing, too.

Chapter End Notes

i hope everyone is having a happy valentines day, and that ur all feeling loved today!
here is this chapter, as a present:) i hope u enjoyed it! also, everyone pls wish quackity
a happy birthday!!!
as always, pls feel free to comment, kudos, and u can see me [here](#) or [here!](#)

the chase

Chapter Summary

"You blush so easily," Dream observes.

"From anger," 404 says. "This is anger. I'm going to kill you."

"I feel like if you really wanted to kill me, you'd have tried it already."

"I did try," he sounds unamused when he reminds Dream, "with that screwdriver, like, four weeks ago. And with the plaque I threw at you. Also with the -"

"Okay, I get it, you've got a murderous streak for me," Dream cuts in.

Chapter Notes

hello!

thank u once again for all the kindness on the last post:) every comment brightens up my universe!!!

i hope u enjoy this chapter just as well,
happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's Thursday, it's five a.m., and Clay walks into the diner because he is an idiot in love.

The bell signals his arrival, as it always does when he opens the door, night chill fading when he's welcomed into the warmth of the diner. He doesn't even have a proper reason to be here, not when his next mission concerning 404 is next week, and he's nearly caught up on all his college work, but -

"I'll be right with you!" The voice he'd been hoping to hear tells him, and Clay takes a seat, fiddling with his phone. Sue him if he was absolutely destroying his sleep schedule to see the pretty waiter; Clay was *infatuated*, okay, and anyone else would be too, if someone so good looking was also so nice.

"Hello," the waiter greets, pen in hand, "it's you again."

"You remember me?" Clay questions, and he can just *feel* his hopes raising.

He nods, a slight smile on his lips when he says, "Of course, anyone would remember someone falling asleep and then waking up to tip forty-seven dollars."

He giggles when Clay groans, humiliation clear on his face when he thinks about him having fallen asleep at the diner. "God, that was embarrassing," he mumbles into his hands, face in his palms. He hears the waiter laugh, and his *laugh*, someone better catch Clay.

"No, don't worry, it wasn't that bad," he reassures. "Really, if you were so tired, why were you at a diner?"

"Work," Clay responds, and it isn't exactly a lie. "It has me stay up a lot."

The waiter looks at him. "I'd assume so, considering you've been in here three times during my shifts." Clay can feel his face warming, and hopes to whatever greater being that the waiter didn't notice.

"Yet I still don't know your name," Clay says, before immediately wanting to smash his head into the table in front of him. Some part of himself considers not doing that, as it would be a hassle for the waiter to clean up, and Clay would rather try to avoid being as inconvenient as possible. Why he had chosen to be bold today was beyond him; flirting with customer service workers was a big *no* in Clay's book, and yet here he was.

He has to hold back a sigh of relief when the waiter isn't immediately creeped out, and instead easily responds, "It's George, if you must know."

George, Clay's mind repeats, and it oddly fits the waiter, with his ability to look good at six a.m. and easy laughter. He nearly takes the privilege of saying it, forming it in his own mouth before realizing *that's weird*, and he should respond, like a normal, socially competent person.

"I'm Clay," he replies, and the waiter - George, nods.

"Alright, Clay. What would you like today?"

Dream spends the next few weeks failing to recruit 404.

("Why are you always here," 404 sighs when catching sight of Dream next to the sculpture, who is half-hazardly throwing a knife in one hand, the other holding his face in his palm, bored.

"My main goal," Dream begins, a small voice in his head supplying with *is to blow up* - "is to recruit you."

"I think I would rather eat an entire ostrich alive," 404 says, before attempting to impale him with a screwdriver.)

("We could be coworkers!")

404 turns to face him, and even with the shades, Dream can feel the unimpressed expression behind his goggles. "I genuinely cannot think of anything else I would hate more."

"Imagine it," Dream tries to set the picture, an outstretched arm in front of him. "Us, on missions together. We could be like a rom-com, where two superheroes are forced to work together and grow close until eventually falling in love. We could be Oscar-nominated. Our award could be presented to us by Chris Evans."

404, with the dryness of the Sahara desert, plainly states, "I would find more respect earned in working alongside alleged mass murderers than in being coworkers with you."

Dream pauses. "If it's any consolation, you'd be coworkers with them too.")

("Consider it!" Dream shouts as 404 throws a plaque in his direction, barely missing when it flies over his head.

“I will *not*,” 404 responds, painting in one hand as he leaps out of the window. Dream hurries after him, looking down at the ground, where 404 lands gracefully and spares a fleeting look towards him.

“We cover dental!” He calls after him.

“Fuck you!”)

With these failed missions, however, Clay can't find himself to be all that irritated, when he instead finds a very bright silver lining - the silver lining being in the shape of a waiter.

After the third night of chasing 404 down the halls of a prestigious art gallery, Clay often finds himself heading to the diner, more for the possibility to have an actual, proper conversation with George, rather than the food itself. His wallet was crying with how much money he was spending at the diner. He's definitely their number one contributor, at this point.

Clay can't find it in him to care about his slowly emptying wallet, however, because after the fourth time of walking into the diner at an incredibly unreasonable time, George had greeted him by his name (“Good morning, Clay,” George had said, and some part of Clay had turned to absolute slush with how George had said his name, and the fact that he remembered it at all), and he thinks his sleep deprivation is absolutely worth it.

Sapnap, however, does not think so.

“You are the biggest simp I've ever met,” he tells Clay one morning, when neither of them have any classes, and they both watch as Sapnap's character in a video game falls into a lava pool, all his items burning on the screen. Clay takes a second to laugh at him.

“Didn't you learn an entire language so you could talk to your boyfriend's boyfriend?” Clay points out, and is immediately hit with a throw pillow.

“Jodete, soy *romantico*,” Sapnap replies, and Clay pretends to know what that means.

Nonetheless, it doesn't matter what Sapnap thinks, because Sapnap is as much of a simp as Clay is, and even then, Clay couldn't find it in him to care when he spends more and more time each visit, talking to George about nothing and anything at all.

“You're a *Florida man*,” George realizes during one of their conversations, eyebrows raised when he looks at Clay. Clay always feels a little exposed when George looks at him, talks to him, even acknowledges him. It feels like a privilege. “That explains so much.”

“I feel like I should be offended,” Clay says, eating a French fry. George takes one from his plate too, sitting across from him in the booth. Clay is often thankful that the rest of the world is sensible enough to be asleep during the dark hours, because it means he gets away with pulling George from his job and spending a few minutes with Clay, and just Clay.

Clay learns, after a few moments spent, that George overtakes anything he likes, stealing fries from his plate, stealing time that could be spent sleeping from Clay, stealing Clay's *heart* because why wouldn't he, with his delicate features, laugh like spring and hands of a pianist.

Clay is William Shakespeare when he has a crush on someone, apparently.

“You should,” George brings him out of his thoughts, nodding easily. “I mean full offense. I bet you've wrestled a crocodile before.” When Clay doesn't deny it, silently eating another fry, a smile splits into his face, showing white teeth, and his eyes scrunch up as he laughs in disbelief. “*No*,

you have, haven't you? Oh my God, you absolute American!"

"It was an alligator, actually," Clay mutters, and it's worth the teasing when it makes George laugh even harder, an arm around his stomach as he leans over in his seat. Clay can't help but smile as well, chuckling when neither of them stop laughing.

"My bad for not knowing the difference," he rolls his eyes, picking up another fry. "Wrestling animals. What a weird hobby to pick up," George shakes his head. "And that includes hunting. Pick up another hobby that doesn't include bloodshed, like. Like crocheting."

Clay looks at George, who tries not to laugh at the look on his face. "Crocheting? Wrestling animals to *crocheting*? That's the best you can come up with?"

"It's a perfectly normal hobby," George defends. "You're insulting every grandma ever."

"My grandmother would never be so lame as to crochet," Clay shakes his head.

"Yeah? What, does she wrestle alligators too? Family tradition?" George eggs on, and half of Clay wants to say *yeah* just to watch him laugh again.

"No," Clay sniffs. "She knits."

George gives him a look. "That's literally so much worse."

The sun is up and out, dousing the entire diner with golden light as they talk. Some part of Clay acknowledges how him spending so many nights ditching sleep for George would definitely come back to bite, but he couldn't find it in him to regret it. It mostly makes him curious as to what kind of schedule George is on, working night shifts while also being a college student.

"I work during the night, and sleep during the day," George shrugs when Clay asks, tapping his fingers against the table. "After work, I go to the studio when it opens, and then sleep until my night classes, and then go to work."

"You're nocturnal," Clay comments, "like a - a sugar glider."

"A sugar glider." George gives him an unamused look. "That's the best you can do?"

"You think of another animal, if you're suddenly an animal expert," Clay challenges, leaning back and crossing his arms. George rolls his eyes, a smile playing on his lips.

"I can think of so many! Foxes, possums, owls," he lists, ticking them off on his fingers.

Clay raises an eyebrow. "You'd rather be an owl than a sugar glider?"

"Yes," George crosses his own arms, mimicking Clay's own pose. "At least owls are somewhat normal looking - sugar gliders look so *weird* with their," he gestures to his own eyes, "big, demon-like eyes. They're creepy."

"Sugar gliders are *cute*," Clay refutes, throwing a salt packet at George.

George raises an eyebrow; he's got an eyebrow scar on one of them, he realizes, curiosity as to where it came from swallowing up his chest. George's voice is teasing when he says, "Are you calling me *cute*, Clay?"

Clay has never been flirty, not like Dream, where he can be free of burden when he uses pick up lines and suggestive comments. He has never had the right amount of confidence to pull it off, and

often, it would be surprising to see how much more resigned Clay is when compared to Dream.

Dream offers anonymity, actions with no consequences when he fights or flees or flirts. Clay is only ever consequences, sometimes with no action when he simply breathes.

With this in mind, Clay is slightly alarmed with himself when he finds himself saying, “You *are* cute, George.”

George also seems taken back, surprise on his face when he looks at Clay, eyes analyzing, and for a second Clay wonders if he’s done something terribly, terribly out of line. Half of him is already trying to figure out how to create time travel so he could go back to when he did not royally fuck up, and the other half is thoroughly panicking at the growing silence between them.

George blinks, before growing *very* red, a smile splitting on his face when he brings up his hands to touch his cheeks, and Clay nearly explodes at how endearing he is.

“You’re *weird*,” George laughs, and the tension is gone.

Clay learns so much about George over the course of the nights.

He learns of him being colorblind when he calls Clay’s green hoodie yellow, and of his cats when he pulls out eight hundred pictures of them, and the fact that he’s an art student when Clay walks in on him sketching once, and of George’s terrible sleep schedule when he mentions not having slept for two days straight, and the fact that George can’t handle horror and that he’s friends with Karl and Quackity, who are coincidentally dating Sapnap, and that George can never pick his favorite of anything.

He learns all of this at the expense of not having any sleep at all for a few nights, 404 or not, which, in his humble opinion, is *entirely worth it*. George, who catches on after a few times, however, disagrees.

“You could have just asked for my number, you know,” George tells him when Clay is close to falling asleep in his seat, “like a normal person.”

“You need to stand out to be noticed,” Clay had said poetically, reciting something he’s pretty sure he’s read on Pinterest before. “How else am I supposed to make you fall in love with me?”

George had looked at him in complete silence, before huffing a laugh, a light blush falling on his cheeks. He goes like that, Clay notices after the first few times, as though George was trying to figure out whether or not Clay was being serious, or if there was some sort of puzzle needing to be solved before he properly reacted.

His eyes are dark every time Clay stares at them staring at him. He can’t hold proper eye contact with them, dropping his own gaze when George looks right back at his own green eyes.

He wonders if George can tell what color his eyes are.

Even with the odd pause in silence, Clay takes the chance to say things like that as often as he can, because the flush that blooms in George’s face inevitably is worth seeing every time.

Now, though, Clay has George’s number. In his *phone*, where he could text the other any time he liked, and call him, and send him pictures and send bad memes and flirt with him and *imagine how*

pink he is on the other side -

Clay's mind goes on overdrive whenever it comes to George, he's realizing, like a train going off the rails. He can't help it, he's sort of very infatuated, and how couldn't he be?

He's had crushes before, like anyone else, and they always go the same way, where his thoughts and worlds are filled with just *them*, until eventually, the adoration breaks and Clay realizes the high expectations he had built for them were essentially unattainable with how tall he'd built them to be, and then he goes back to normal. Like everyone else.

He assumes it would be the same with George, where after a few weeks, the image he had built of George would shatter, and Clay can go back to being just slightly enamoured by everything he learns about the other man.

Yet George seems to break each expectation, and build upon it, and Clay can only wait until something goes wrong. There was only so much a person can be human before idolization breaks, after all.

But it's been weeks, and Clay is still -

Clay cannot get *enough* of George.

404 groans in disappointment at the sight of Dream, gloved hands fiddling with his hoodie strings, standing right next to the small sculpture sat upon a display pillar. He runs a hand through his hair, and a frustrated sigh escapes past his lips. Dream offers a wide smile.

"I can tell you're excited to see me," he chirps, standing off the wall he had been leaning against. 404 flips him off.

"Can't I steal in *peace*," he complains. "You're *always* here, and it's not even - no one is having fun, here."

Dream tilts his head. "I don't know, I'm having fun."

"Of course you are," 404 mutters. "You suck, do you know that? You suck. You suck *so* bad." Dream raises his eyebrows, and despite his face being concealed, he's pretty sure 404 can tell anyways, with a beat of silence until 404 shakes his head. "Not like that, you absolute sleaze."

"It can be like that, if you want," he says anyways, and watches the small section of 404's exposed face turn pink.

"Have you ever considered not speaking," 404 suggests flatly.

"You blush so easily," Dream observes, a smile on his face when he watches 404 turn even redder.

"From anger," 404 says. "This is anger. I'm going to kill you."

"I feel like," Dream leans in front of the sculpture when 404 steps closer, "if you really wanted to kill me, you'd have tried it already."

"I did try," he sounds unamused when he reminds Dream, "with that screwdriver, like, four weeks ago. And with the plaque I threw at you. Also with the -"

“Okay, I get it, you’ve got a murderous streak for me,” Dream cuts in, slightly pouting. “But I mean, it was all jokes, right? After all, I *am* trying to recruit you, you know.”

“I wasn’t joking with the screwdriver.” 404’s watch starts to beep, and he is quick to turn it off, as a reflex. Dream raises an eyebrow, unbeknownst to the other underneath the mask.

He takes a look at the sculpture - a small thing, barely as big as his hand, with gold carvings and muddy coloring, and he has no idea why it was worth as much as it is - and swipes it off its podium, to which 404’s frown deepens. “You know, I’ve been meaning to ask,” he passes the sculpture from one hand to the other, “what is that alarm for? It’s always during these little dates of ours, too.”

404 makes an unbelieving noise. “‘Dates’? If this is what you consider a date, then I feel bad for whoever you -”

“Do you have, like, a meeting to get to after this?” Dream interrupts. “Where do you have to be every night of ours at,” he spares a look at his own watch, “two-thirty a.m.?” He takes a step closer to the doorway, and 404 follows. “What happens if you don’t get this in your hands,” he waves the sculpture, “before you have to go?”

404 doesn’t answer, tilting his head when Dream takes another step, closer to being out in the hallway than in the display room. “I wouldn’t know,” he starts when they’re both creeping towards the doorway. “I’ve never failed before.”

Wow, Dream blinks. *Cocky.*

It was kind of, unfortunately, attractive.

“Maybe we find out today,” Dream grins, before bolting into the hallway.

A long string of curses is immediate when 404 hurries to follow, the sound of their running in the dark museum as they chase through the halls. Dream has the sudden urge to laugh, with what odd variation they’ve got of elementary-school tag, and a weird feel of anxiety sparks in his stomach when he hears 404’s steps getting too close for comfort when he takes a turn.

“You’re *joking*,” he hears 404 complain as they run into the wide opening room; the entrance, with high ceilings and two levels, with one platform overseeing the ground floor.

He hops over the guarding bar of a statue, shortcutting to the stairs as 404 struggles to catch up. “I definitely am not,” he replies, chuckling when 404 slows down to carefully duck under the bar. “C’mon, can’t even hop over a measly bar? It’s not even three feet off the floor!”

“I can’t *do* parkour,” 404 grumbles, running up the steps, and Dream remembers that he isn’t meant to just stand at the top of the stairs and stare. He tightens his hold on the sculpture, and starts to run. “Oh my God, *no*, this isn’t fair,” he hears behind him. “Your legs are abnormally long, this is in no way a fair game.”

“Maybe it’s because you’re tiny,” Dream suggests, and receives a few curse words in response.

"You're just a fucking giraffe."

He turns back, facing 404. “This might do you good, you know, us running around,” Dream quips, watching as 404 runs a hand through his hair, cheeks slightly pink. “You’re literally all bones - which isn’t, um, *bad*,” Dream clears his throat, “but how are you going to chase down super villains if you can’t even chase down me?”

“That’s under the assumption that I’m joining whatever superhero league you’ve got going on,” 404 huffs. “There is no good reason for me to join, unless you pay me better than literal billionaires.”

Dream pauses. “We can pay you with the knowledge that you did a good thing?” He offers.

If he could see behind the goggles, Dream would be sure that 404 was giving him a flat look. “Tempting.”

“It pains me that you won’t even consider it,” he says (*whines*), yelping when 404 creeps closer, and quickly backs up.

“Good. Be in pain.”

Dream snickers, stepping backwards as he turns to look at 404, sculpture in his left hand as his right hand holds onto the railing placed on the edge of the platform. “Oh, I didn’t know you were into *that*. ” He can’t help but laugh harder when 404 turns flustered, mouth opening and closing before he simply scowls.

“You - what is *wrong* with you?” He vouches to simply ask, hurrying his pace to chase after Dream. “How do you manage to turn everything so - so - just, *ugh*,” he groans, rubbing at his cheek when Dream’s smile widens. “I’m going to shove that sculpture up your -”

Some inner Bad yells *Language!* while Dream jumps away from 404, giggles escaping past his lips when he rushes past many more art pieces, until growing tired of running around the same, square track of the platform. When 404, for a split second, does corner him, it isn’t for long when he simply jumps off the platform and onto the ground floor, several feet below both of them.

“Oh my God, you dumbass!” 404 calls after him when Dream lands, somewhat painfully, on his feet, the heels of his feet aching when he jogs away, looking up to peer at 404 on the balcony above him.

“Aw, were you worried about me?” Dream coos, and 404 looks around for something to throw at him, before running for the stairs. “You do care!”

“I was worried about the sculpture, idiot.” He gives up halfway on the stairs, jumping from the edge and, similarly, landing on his feet. 404 stumbles a bit, sucking in a breath and chasing after Dream into the hallway.

The darkened art museum, prestigious as it is, is also incredibly confusing with its multiple hallways, seemingly leading into different rooms each time. There were no directions or maps offered, and it would be easy to get lost during the day, with sunlight offering what little guidance it could provide.

Now, however, in the dead of night, with all the lights turned off and nothing but the scuff of their shoes against the marble floors, the art museum was a shifting labyrinth.

Dream is pretty sure he runs past the same painting of fruit twice, and the marble statue of a naked woman thrice, but somehow 404 still hasn’t caught up to him - thankfully. He’d nearly been caught once, when he accidentally walked into a bronze statue of some Roman warrior, and the only thing alerting him of 404 had been his sudden laughter, light and tinkering when it echoed into the room.

It was almost familiar, in a way, but Dream had spared it no thought when 404 had swiped for the sculpture, and Dream ran away.

They both run toward one of the bigger rooms of marble statues, both broken and brand new, and it's definitely irresponsible to run between them recklessly, but Dream is having way too much fun being chased by 404. There's probably something to psychoanalyze there, but he'd rather not think about it.

"Just hand it over so we can both leave," 404 calls out, looking around as Dream ducks behind a large pillar, sculpture firmly in his grasp. "*Please*, my legs hurt and I'm tired," he complains, albeit quieter when he slows to a walk into the room.

404 clearly doesn't know of Dream being in the room, as he watches the art thief let his guard down. His shoulders drop as he huffs, both hands in his hair as he walks over to a painting hung up in the front, and Dream slowly leans to the side to watch.

Dream holds his breath. 404 lets both his hands drop to his sides as he leans closer to the painting; the painting itself is smaller than most in the room, an art style similar to those that Dream created in art class, abstract shapes and figures - he wouldn't be able to tell what sort of time period, alright, he's an English major.

"Not fucking Picasso," he mumbles, presumably to himself, so quiet that Dream strains to hear it. "Should've brought my spray paint." A vivid memory of vandalized Picasso paintings flutters into mind, and Dream is reminded of Wilbur's glee from so many weeks ago.

He walks over to a few more paintings, a small grimace on his lips as 404 inspects some of those hung up on the wall. He comes a little too close to where Dream hides, and he holds his breath when 404 is less than a few feet away.

He only exhales when the thief takes a few steps back, turning on his heel and walking away. They both pause, however, when the low beeping of 404's watch begins, and Dream freezes as the other slowly turns it off.

"Are you fucking with me," he mutters to himself. He looks up from his watch, and takes a sweeping look around him as he walks out of the room. He pauses when Dream shifts from one foot to the other, and leaves a few seconds later.

Dream follows after a minute or so, when it becomes apparent that 404 doesn't suspect him to be in the room. He stays a safe distance away, watching as the other goes through every single possible room in the art museum, growing increasingly frustrated when Dream is apparently nowhere to be found. Ironical, when he's just a few feet away.

He pauses in front of a few paintings, taking the liberty to tilt his head or stare intently at them until looking away, continuing his search. Dream follows a few moments later, looking at the paintings and searching for whatever had caught 404's eye. They all seemed quite repetitive to him, but he hasn't picked up a paintbrush since fourth grade, so maybe that isn't saying much.

A near half hour passes as 404 walks through the entire museum, occasionally stopping at an art piece that catches his eye, seemingly in no hurry, until his watch starts to beep again. This puts him in some sort of panic, however, when he catches sight of the time.

"Shit," he exhales, peering at his watch. 404 takes another look around himself, sparing no suspicion on the statue that Dream hides behind. "What am I even supposed to -"

He cuts himself off, sighing out of exhaustion, it seems, and Dream almost feels bad, if not for the fact that 404 is a literal criminal. Dream watches, silently, as 404 takes off his watch, tucking it into his pocket. He somewhat jogs out of the room, and Dream moves to return the sculpture to its

display stand.

Dream doesn't follow 404 out of the museum.

George, oddly, seems slightly worn out when Clay catches sight of him later that night.

"Are you okay?" He says as a greeting when George sets his head down onto the table, before bringing it back up at the sound of Clay's voice.

"I'm fine," he's quick to reply. "I just had to - set out. A fire," George finishes, looking surprised at where his own words ended up.

"I - for real?" Concern spikes into his stomach. "Are you okay? Did you get hurt or anything?" He quickly assesses George in front of him, checking for any obvious injuries while the other flushes under his gaze.

"No, I'm not hurt," he rolls his eyes, slightly pink in the face. Clay raises an eyebrow, and George gives him a look. "I'm serious. Do you think I'd still willingly be here if I was actually hurt?"

Clay hums. "Yeah, okay. You've got a point."

"I always do," George responds, standing up straight and stretching.

Clay averts his eyes when his shirt rises up a little. "Maybe I should just believe everything you say, then."

"You should," George replies, ducking under the counter to grab a pen. He looks up when he finds a notepad as well, and with his slightly messy hair and slight flush on his face, Clay's stomach feels *weird*, swarms of butterflies and birds taking home in his body.

"What?" George asks when Clay keeps staring.

Clay clearly doesn't have a filter when he says without thinking, "You're really pretty."

"I don't," George stops himself, hands in midair as he stands frozen, rapidly turning pink. "What?" Clay can't hold back the laughter when George doesn't move after a few seconds, until defrosting to glare at him. "Why do you just *say* that?" Moments pass of Clay dissolving into laughter while George's blush deepens, and he crosses his arms.

"No, I'm serious, someone needs to put some sort of filter on you! You just say whatever comes to mind without thinking about the consequences," he says, in the manner that a mother would probably scold a child, and it only makes him laugh harder.

"You blush," he chokes out, " *so* easily!"

George falls silent, squinting at him as Clay calms down, a smile on his face as they stare at each other. A silence falls between them, the low hum of the kitchen serving as white noise when neither of them speak. It's almost too quiet now, from the earlier loudness of Clay's laughter and George's flustered scolding.

"What?" He asks, slightly self conscious when George keeps staring, not unlike the situation before. "Are you going to call *me* cute this time?"

"You remind me of someone," George says instead, head tilted to the side when he keeps staring. Clay can feel his eyes on him, jumping from his nose to mouth to eyes and mouth again. He really hopes that he isn't blushing right now; it'd be too ironic.

"Is that good?"

"Not sure," George slowly answers in a quiet voice. He lets his eyes drop as he clicks open his pen, and Clay relaxes.

"So, what would you like today?"

Chapter End Notes

Jodete, soy romantico = Fuck you, I'm romantic

thank you [ChillRosey](#) for the correction!!!!

i do apologize for any mistakes spotted, school is going for my throat rn!!!

as always, pls feel free to comment, kudos, and u can see me [here](#) or [here!](#)

the painting

Chapter Summary

"I can't believe you're trying to bribe me with fries."

"But it's working," George points out when Clay takes a seat on a stool, elbows resting on the bar as the other joins him.

"I am a simple man," he tells George, "with simple needs. Such as fries that are also free, please."

George snickers. "Only because you said please."

Chapter Notes

!!!!**TW// gun

hi again:)! thanku once again for the overload of support for the last post, u have no idea how much i appreciate every comment n kudos!!!! it encourages me endlessly<3!!

i hope u enjoy this chap just as much!!

happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

As he faces the barrel of a gun, Dream decides that he was probably having a bad day.

He'd assume he was having a bad day, at least. He isn't quite sure what qualifies as a bad day after becoming Dream, but being held at gunpoint is probably a downer to a typical citizen, right?

"You know, maybe aiming a gun at my head isn't the best idea," he says, stepping backward when the robber steadies their hold on the gun. He was thankful that he'd been able to get everyone out of the bank before the robber had started to take shots, too busy dealing with Dream punching them in the gut while everyone else ran out of the building. Dream is great with diversions like that.

Bank robberies were always such a hassle; the shadow of federal involvement always loomed over Dream, who generally did not want anything to do with the government or the police, despite how "closely" he works with them. All in all, Dream rates it a two out of ten experience every time. Definitely low on the crime-tier list.

In all honesty, bank robberies weren't all that big of a deal when it came to bad days, and sometimes it was the most interesting part of his week. Even the attempted murder on his life while he was being shot at several times was all he had to look forward to on a Friday, which - sounds more depressing than he realized.

"One of us isn't going to be walking out of here," the robber growls, and Dream tries not to laugh at how cartoonish the situation is. "Hand over the bag, and I'll be nice enough to make your death quick. Painless if I shoot your stomach - the aorta, maybe."

Dream watches as the robber shifts from one foot to the other, antsy. Despite the confidence they

displayed, they were definitely nervous. Their eyes kept flickering to the bag full of cash, scattered behind Dream. The police were probably on their way. He hopes so. He's got places to be.

"I'm going to be very honest with you," Dream begins, "I wouldn't have expected you to know basic human anatomy, much less what the aorta is. Kind of surprised you even know how to stand up on your own two feet." He was a superhero, but that didn't mean he had to be nice about it.

The robber probably frowns, but Dream has nothing to go off of besides their eyes peeking through two holes in their ski-mask, clearly cut with a pair of dull scissors. This bank robbery really could not get any more cliché. "You think this is a joke, you son of a -"

Dream ducks as the robber shoots at him, twisting their outstretched arm while they cried out, probably both in shock and pain. He forces the gun out of their hand, kneeling them in the stomach when they curl into his grab. When they still stand, Dream shoves them onto the floor, their body colliding with the marble with a low grunt.

"Kind of, yeah," he answers honestly, frowning when the robber wouldn't let go of his leg, now on the ground. "Why is your grip so weirdly strong," he comments, shaking the robber off his leg.

He throws the gun aside, and kneels down, pulling handcuffs out of his back pocket. "Sorry," he says when the robber grunts in pain, "I'd usually let you hold up a bigger fight, but I'm really running late. Places to be, you know? I'm a busy man."

The robber struggles while Dream puts the handcuffs on them, huffing in annoyance when they won't stand still. "I am not against using your own gun on you," he warns, and the robber stills under his hold. "Yeah, that's what I thought," he grumbles, stepping away from them.

Really, the fact that he had slightly bruised knuckles from an earlier fight with the robber wasn't even enough to hinder his good mood, nor the slight splash of mud on his favorite pair of shoes from having to run into the back alleyway to hide his masked self. The slight shoving he receives on the way there isn't enough to entirely make his day all that bad, he swears.

What really did him in was the fact that he was running late to see *George*.

It was something he had been looking forward to for the past day and a half, after he'd offered to join George on his study session for one of his required classes - something about art history, something Clay knew absolutely nothing about, but every atom that made up Clay's body urged to spend as much time with George as he could, and who was he to protest?

And when the opportunity presented itself, right then and there in the booth they always sat in, six a.m. sunshine peeking into the diner, Clay had hesitated once before asking to join him, and by some miracle, George had readily accepted.

"Sorry, sorry," Dream mumbles as he quickly forces his way through the chattering crowd, many who sought out Dream while Clay walked past them, mask off and, essentially, invisible to the crowd.

Now, though, he had to get to the library, where he had agreed to meet George for a study session for their respective classes - the same library that was all the way across town, and was about to close in less than thirty minutes - thirty minutes that Clay does not have.

People swerve away from his path as he hurries through them, a slight panic in his bones as he attempts to get to the other side of town, as far away from the bank as one could get. The route there is a rush, with Clay nearly being run over thrice, which isn't all that bad in his standards.

When he does arrive at the now-closed library, peering down at the four texts George had left him in the last two hours, with the last one having been five minutes ago -

george <3

hi i'm here

lmk when you get here

george <3

? where are you lol

george <3

i went home, idk where you were

- Clay could say he was having a pretty bad day.

He spends his afternoon lamenting.

"Sapnap, *please*, he isn't returning my texts," Clay mourns loudly to Sapnap, who is more interested in slowly drawing a deformed minion on a blue cake, yellow frosting smeared on his cheek. When seconds pass without response, he whines, "*Help me.*"

"I don't know what to tell you man, you fucked up." With a loud noise of despair, Clay collapses onto the sofa, hearing the exact opposite of what he wanted.

Why he ever went to Sapnap for these things, he'd never know. Maybe because Karl and Quackity were even worse options. Skeppy and Bad also had their own weird thing going on that no one knew the semantics of and at this point Clay was too scared to ask about it.

"I'd appreciate some advice in this dark time," he spoke into the sofa cushion. Maybe if he tries hard enough, he will simply sink into the sofa, and cease to exist. Possibly become with the sofa. Maybe then he wouldn't be so *dumb*.

Sapnap made an agreeing noise. "You are kind of dumb."

"You aren't supposed to *agree*," Clay wails, throwing a throw pillow at Sapnap, who easily dodges it, not looking up from his cake. "What is - what are you even doing?" He flops around on the sofa, before rolling off and landing on the floor with a dull thud. He groans, mostly out of courtesy than actual pain.

"Making a birthday cake for Karl," Sapnap responds happily, face focused as he squeezes white frosting out of the pipe.

"Oh. Forgot about that," Clay tells the floor, mentally filing away to buy Karl a birthday gift.

He turns onto his back, and looks up at the ceiling. A post-it note with the simply word of *SEX* in sharpie stares back at him. Quackity had definitely been here. Some part of him wonders how he had been able to reach so high up. "How're you guys celebrating?" He asks as slowly gets up from the floor, standing up and nearly tripping over the low coffee table.

Sapnap sets down the white frosting pipe, and picks up a black one. "Me and Quackity are gonna surprise him tomorrow with a picnic," he mumbles, lips pressed together in concentration. Clay raises an eyebrow and shuffles over, holding a sofa cushion to his chest.

"That sounds nice." He wonders when George's birthday is, if he'd also like to have a picnic together, possibly feed each other strawberries like in the movies, before remembering that George was probably mad at him and would definitely remove him from his life and never speak to Clay again, *as he should*, and he was doomed to simply wither away as a lonely old man in his seventies and yell at kids who stepped on his lawn. "Oh my God, what do I do about George," he remembers, shoving his face into the sofa cushion.

"Dude, I don't know, maybe apologize in person? I'd prefer that over a sorry in a text," Sapnap replies, looking up from his cake for the first time in the entire conversation. "Maybe also shower or something. You look rough, man."

"So does your cake," Clay says with as much malice as he can manage, which isn't a lot at the moment. "Why are you drawing a minion?"

"It's supposed to be Jake from Adventure Time," Sapnap groans, dropping the frosting pipe. "Go away, your vibes are ruining the cake."

"The cake was ruined the second your hands got on it," Clay tells him factually, and yelps when a plastic spoon hits his head.

With all this in mind, maybe it wasn't entirely unexpected for Dream to be a little less than enthusiastic to see 404 in the same night.

He isn't sure if he could take another night of futile recruiting with him being so caught up with George, but then again, he's always caught up with George. No one could blame him.

Surprisingly, he is a little late when he gets to the art gallery, mind a little muddled when he walks in. There was still some time before 404 was due to arrive, if his trend of arriving around two a.m. was any bit reliable.

Apparently, it was not any bit reliable, because there stood 404, leaning on the newly arrived art piece's platform, a gold plaque titled *Troublesome* underneath him, and maybe that was a little ironic.

"Evening," 404 greets like an old-fashioned party host, slow to standing up straight, as though he'd been waiting for Dream's arrival. Some thought of that made his stomach feel fuzzy. Probably out of anticipation of a new inanimate object being thrown at him. Last week, it had been a hammer, and 404 was getting unnervingly good at his aim.

"Hello," Dream responds, eyebrows furrowed. "Were you waiting for me?"

"I was," 404 affirms, passing a small piece of painted wood from one hand to the other. Dream does realize that he should probably retrieve it, but now he's curious.

Why 404 had stuck around waiting for Dream to make his job harder was beyond him, but Dream brightens anyways. "You missed me, didn't you?" Dream grins, stepping further into the room, fingerless-gloved hands tucked into his back pockets. "I can't believe I've finally grown onto you."

He ignores it, in sake of his own ego, when 404 mutters, "Like mold." He clears his throat, leaning forward, and Dream resists the urge to do the same. "Actually, I have a proposition for you."

This has Dream pause. "Of what kind?"

404 places the art piece back onto its platform, and crosses his arms. He sounds resigned, sighing almost when he leans back onto the wall. "Of just, you know, just," he struggles, rubbing the side of his face. "Just - listen before you do or say anything."

"People say I'm a great listener," Dream replies, knowing fully well that no one has ever said that about him ever.

Silence settles between them as 404 seems to prepare himself, chewing on his bottom lip as he tries to figure out how to phrase it, maybe. He was still standing on the platform, now five inches taller from the floor. He still looks short. A gremlin of sorts.

Dream rocks on the heel of his feet as he waits, patiently, for 404 to get to the point. He's never been the most patient, but 404 seems like he'd back off immediately if Dream didn't stay quiet, so he pulls through, just this once.

After a long few moments, 404 heaves a sigh, and Dream almost combusts when he says, with the defeat similar to that of Britain's during the Revolutionary War -

"I'll join your stupid superhero league."

"He'll *what*?" Wilbur exclaims, dropping the pen he'd been playing with.

"He'll join us," Dream repeats, pulling on his hoodie - his lime one, the one that attracts the most attention, and the one he never wears on missions unless it was laundry day. Unfortunately for him, Sapnap had forgotten to buy more laundry detergent on his way home, so here he was. A neon sign with a smiley-face mask. He makes it work.

Wilbur stands up from his chair, clasping his hands in excitement. He opens his mouth, probably to congratulate him, before Dream interrupts, "On one condition."

Wilbur deflates, falling back into his chair, hair flopping against his face. It was kind of frizzy, like he'd just gotten it dried, and it still looks good. Dream hates it. "As expected," he sighs, whispering to the air in front of him, "why are there always conditions?" He rubs his eyes, and turns back to Dream. "What condition?"

"I," he says, feeling kind of ridiculous, "have to find a painting."

("There's this painting I did, some time ago," 404 had said. "It's placed in one of the town's art galleries.")

Dream blinked, trying to figure out where this was going. "You want to flex your art abilities?"

"I want you to find it," 404 tangled his fingers together, "and steal it for me."

A beat of silence. Dream stared. "What?" He asked intelligently.

"If you find it, I'll join your league," 404 said patiently, somehow looking satisfied as Dream fumbled, even under the goggles.

"But I don't know *anything* about art," Dream protested, "or *thievery*."

404 smiled.

"I know.")

Wilbur gives a contemplating hum, and despite them being in quite the pickle, there's a small smile sprouting on his face. "You know, I do love a fun puzzle." Who hired Wilbur to be the head of a superhero league had definitely been on something.

"I am about to commit a crime," Dream reminds him.

"We've all committed crimes," Wilbur responds easily, picking his pen back up and tapping it against his chin. He squints at the wall behind Dream, an inquiring look on his face as he thinks. "Besides, I think we can make an exception for this."

Dream chews on his inner cheek. "I mean, there's not much I can do besides find the painting."

Wilbur slowly nods, still not looking at him. "I suppose you're right. Perhaps we could try to find some more background on 404, although we haven't been able to find more than what we had a few months ago. In all honesty, these past few weeks have been the most he's allowed himself to be on our radar, and he's still not letting himself slip."

"Maybe I could fish some information out of him?" Dream suggests, slightly dubious, because if he was being honest, he has never dealt with someone like 404 - someone who was actually *fun*, able to return quips easily and quickly. There was something charming about him, too, in his own way, when they had their own push-and-pull dynamic during Dream's missions, even if 404 was a top-priority art thief.

Wilbur nods. "You can try, sure. I'll be asking Eret to compile a list of all the newest art installations of nearby art galleries from the past year or two, but there's a chance the painting 404 is referencing might be something further back."

"Give me the list anyways," Dream thinks aloud, "there might be something that might be helpful. And go back three years, just in case." Wilbur taps his fingers against his desk, before clapping his hands.

"Alright, I'll send a list over as soon as it's done. You, in the meantime, try to figure out if you have any clues as to what painting it is," Wilbur assigns him. "Maybe he's accidentally given away a few hints, or perhaps he fully mentioned the painting title at some point."

"I don't think various swear words followed by my name is a painting title." Dream runs through any and every conversation he's ever had with 404 - not that it's difficult. They've only ever had light banter, followed by a montage of them playing cat and mouse for a pricey art piece.

Wilbur shrugs, pulling out his phone. "You'd be surprised. Did he say anything else?"

("So you'll join us if I find the painting?" Dream reiterated, staring as 404 hopped down the platform, art piece tucked away in his pocket. Really, Dream should get that back before 404 leaves.

"I'll join you," he confirmed.

"And all I have to do is steal the painting?" He squinted, slightly skeptical. "That's all?"

404 nodded. "That's all."

Dream exhaled, thinking about it before straightening. "Sounds easy. I'm already pretty good at thievery, considering I already stole your heart," he slides in, smooth as peanut butter. The smooth

kind of peanut butter, not the chunky kind, just to specify.

"Maybe you could also manage to steal yourself some brain cells, perhaps." 404 began to walk out of the room.

"Maybe also a date?" He called after him, grinning at 404's retreating figure, not quite expecting an answer.

"Maybe," 404 responded easily anyways, and Dream nearly tripped over air.)

"No," he denies reluctantly, and when Wilbur spares him a look from his phone, he wastes no time leaving.

He's got a waiter to see, after all.

Clay is antsy when he gets there, ultraviolet rays dancing under his skin as he turns onto the block. The sky is a film of darkness, the city's blanket pollution too thick for the stars' to make themselves shown. Still, he entertains the idea of stargazing anyways, looking for the moon when he's only a few steps away from the diner's door. *Positive affirmations*, he reminds himself, thinking back to a self-help book he'd bought a while back. It doesn't really work, but he likes to pretend it does.

His body is always moments away from combusting into colorful confetti every time he thinks of George, as though his body would warp into swarms of canaries the second George's eyes laid on him.

More often than not, it seems Clay makes a fool of himself around George, absolutely no filter when he's around the other man. He knows he would say absolutely anything at the expense of himself to make George smile, and that in itself was probably a very bad habit to have. Those philosophers were probably right when they said love brings out the worst in people.

Clay takes a steadying breath before he steps in front of the diner, taking a quick glance through the window to see George at the register, face bored in his palm. He almost runs away at that moment, but tells himself to keep going, or else Sapnap would never let him hear the end of this.

When he walks into the diner, one hand is in a nervous fist in his hoodie's pocket, and the other fiddles with his necklace. The bell jingles, and a slight breeze enters with Clay when the door opens.

George notices him immediately - of course he does, the door is right in front of him, what - and Clay seriously considers melting into the dirty, checkerboard-patterned floor.

"Hi," Clay announces awkwardly, and if God has ever been merciful, maybe they'd do him a favor and strike him down with lightning right now.

Apparently, God has it out for him, though, because he does not miraculously die. Instead, he watches George's face flicker through several motions - expressionless, raised eyebrows, a slight furrow and a line on his forehead, before it switches to expressionless again.

"Hello," he greets plainly, slowly standing up straight. "What can I get you today?"

Clay forces himself to ignore the other's brashness. "Nothing in particular," he answers, and George's eyes are dark when they look at him, a singular raised eyebrow, "I just wanted to

apologize. In person, I mean, for missing our library meet, I wasn't - I didn't mean to, really!"

"You just happened to forget about it for an entire two hours," George says more than asks, arms crossed. *Lightning strike, please*, Clay thinks.

He winces at the tone, remorse clawing at his stomach. "I didn't - *forget* about it."

George blinks. "You purposely stood me up?"

"No! No, I didn't - no," he hurries to deny, shaking his head while George waits. "I got caught up in my job, and I couldn't get to my phone because it was pretty urgent, and I lost track of time too, so I didn't realize how late I was until it was already close to closing."

He knows he's slightly rambling, feeling urgent in the need for George to *understand*, at the same time of being unable to understand all the same. It's at times like these when he wishes he wasn't limited to how many knew of him being Dream, or the strange "job" he has that leads to him cutting classes, going MIA for long periods of time, and coming home with bruises or blood.

But he can't, and George watches him fumble to explain.

When he can feel his words going dry, George's frown lets up, him rubbing the side of his face as he sighs. "Okay."

Clay pauses in the middle of his sentence. "You - okay?"

George shrugs, "Okay. I don't really - if it was that urgent, then I understand. You don't need to explain anymore. I get it."

Relief surges through his chest, and he exhales, and the heavy weight that had resided on his shoulders is wax, burning off of his shoulders and into nothing. "Really?"

"Yeah," George offers him a small smile, and Clay easily returns it. "We can hang out some other time. It's no big deal."

Maybe God did him a favor by not hitting him with lightning. Sunshine seems to burrow itself into Clay's chest as he nods. "We can," he is immediate to reply, and internally cringes at how eager he sounds. "I still want to make it up to you, though."

George rolls his eyes half-heartedly, the corner of his lips quirked upward. "Seriously, it's fine, Clay."

Karl would definitely call him out for being down bad, but Clay's heart nearly thumps out of his body with how George says his name, tagged along at the end of the sentence. Mildly unnecessary but also making his entire week. Clay's a loser like that.

"Still," he insists, "I feel bad for having you study alone for so long."

"I was going to do that from the very beginning, you know." He taps his fingers against the counter in a rhythmic pattern. "Whether you agreed to accompany me or not."

"But I offered to come with, and then didn't," Clay continues, and George can probably tell he wasn't going to let up anytime soon, sighing.

"I'll just cash in the favor when I think of something," he offers.

"Okay," Clay agrees, and shoves his hands into his hoodie's pockets, now feeling quite awkward.

He'd come here to apologize, and with that done, he wasn't particularly hungry, despite having walked to a diner on an empty stomach. In what was his bottomless stomach, there suddenly was no appetite, surprisingly.

George hums a pondering noise, before asking, "Do you have any plans for tomorrow?"

Tomorrow, thankfully, was a Saturday, filled with absolutely nothing besides possibly lying on the floor with a family-sized bag of chips he'd bought yesterday.

Clay doesn't tell George this. "No, not really."

The other man seems glad by this, nodding, and Clay tries very hard not to think about the implications. "Good. Keep me company on the rest of my shift, then."

"Is this the favor?" He asks, tilting his head. "Already cashing it in?"

George's lips turn up in a grin, "Not really. Just assumed you'd simp hard enough to keep me company, favor or not."

Unfortunately, he was right. Clay would probably give up his own liver for the other man if he asked. It would be best if George didn't know that, though.

"I'm not a *simp*," he lies, like a liar, and George's knowing grin widens. "You know what? I forgot how great company my bed is. I'm leaving."

"No," George lightly whines, drawing out the *o*, and Clay's entire interior immediately collapses, "I'll give you free fries if you stay." He leans onto the counter, and Clay is slightly aghast at how pretty someone could be under such brash fluorescent lights.

He waves away these thoughts because he had *just* said he wasn't a simp, and instead says, "I can't believe you're trying to bribe me with fries."

"But it's working," George points out when Clay takes a seat on a stool, elbows resting on the bar as the other joins him.

"I am a simple man," he tells George, "with simple needs. Such as fries that are also free, please."

George snickers. "Only because you said please."

And Clay, being the weak man he is, keeps George company while the rest of the world slowly arises.

They chat over the bar. Clay makes his way through a plate of free fries, and George busies himself behind the counter as they talk. It's nicer than Clay would ever be able to admit; the odd atmosphere that comes with the dark hours slowly splitting to daytime made his stomach churn, and the hives of bees living in his body any time George was around is a feeling of its own without a name. Unsettling yet not entirely unwelcome, he vaguely registers.

There is a weird burst of satisfaction every time George laughs at a joke Clay is quick to push out, his mind running a thousand miles per hour just to see if George'd laugh at anything he could come up with. George himself makes Clay laugh so very often, and he can't tell if it's because he's genuinely that funny or if Clay is just Whipped™. Both, probably. Sapnap would say the second.

Clay doesn't even like coffee, but finds himself accepting a cup anyway, if only to watch George pour with steady hands and stir in two sugars. He has pianist hands - nimble and bony at the

knuckles, with elegant slopes that would press upon ivory keys. *Perfect for an artist as well*, Clay thinks, and a seed of anxiety sprouts at the remembrance of 404's painting.

"How much do you know about art?" He asks George *the art major*, his sentence interrupted by the sound of George's alarm blaring from his phone. They both jump, and George is quick to turn it off and slide his phone back into his pocket, untying his apron.

"I've heard of it," he says, his lips turning into a smile at his own joke and Clay rolls his eyes, but his own laughter betrays his annoyance.

"You're such an idiot." He throws a balled up napkin at the other man. "I don't know why I even asked."

George grins at him, and Clay forces down the overwhelming urge to return it. "I don't know either. I've got to lock up, though, for the next shift. Wait for me." Clay nods, and George turns away into the back.

Moments pass as Clay waits, halfheartedly scrolling through Twitter, the wasteland that it is, and responds to a few texts he'd forgotten to check after his mission. Sappnap sent him a steady stream of cursed memes, the last one having been a few hours ago, assumingly asleep now.

He flips to George's contact when the waiter comes back, apron now off and a bag off his shoulder. He looks somewhat different out of the apron, somewhat more *real* when they both walk out of the diner together. There's electricity in his veins when they accidentally brush arms, George paying no mind while Clay pays all the mind.

The bell jingles a goodbye when George locks the door, and Clay takes his chance to snap a quick picture for his contact, the other man looking mildly surprised when he looks up.

It's not a good picture - it's slightly too blurry, George's mouth slightly agape when he makes eye contact with the camera and the light blush that's always there is on his cheeks. There's a stray eyelash on his cheekbone. With all its flaws, it's still the best picture Clay has on his phone.

"What was that for?" He asks when they're still standing in front of the diner, adjusting his bag on his shoulder.

"Your contact picture," Clay explains, tilting his phone over to show him, and watches as George wrinkles his nose.

"Why would you set it to be so unflattering," he grumbles, and Clay almost protests before George continues, "where are you heading?"

Clay shrugs. "Nowhere, really. I might walk around a little and then go home."

George nods. "I need to get a few supplies from my apartment." After a pause, he is tentative when he asks, "Do you want to join me?" Because it is not clear to him that Clay would probably build the universe for him.

"Course," he agrees, because Clay really doesn't want to depart just yet, even though the sun has properly risen, the sky a washed-away blue (he vaguely wonders if he and George see the same shade of the sky), and there are people in the street who begin to walk past them. "Are you going to your studio?"

George nods as they begin to walk the opposite way of Clay's apartment. "I usually do after work," he mentions. "I've been working on a painting recently; it's not for a class or anything. Just for

me.”

The proposition 404 had offered floats through his head, and he ignores it in favor of asking George, “What kind of painting?”

Clay knows absolutely nothing about art or what gouache is or the benefits of it, but George is excited when Clay keeps asking questions, so he listens anyways, even if his English major self will probably never use any of this.

He tells him of how it is different than most of his paintings, how he wants to broaden his style, how he’d thought of the concept on the same night of Clay giving him a forty-seven dollar tip, and so on. Clay listens attentively, stringing along with every word.

They turn from street to street, George taking the lead. Their arms brush more often than not (every time George pulls out his phone to check the time, when Clay points at someone’s cat, when they inch closer together as they cross the street), and Clay tries not to notice their height difference (and how he could probably rest his head on top of George’s because apparently Clay is a giant when compared to the other man). He tucks his hand in his pocket when he finds himself wanting to hold George’s hand, almost blushing at the thought.

Across the counter or a booth table, they’d never stood next to each other, and Clay gets a realization that they were *hanging out*, outside the diner, which means they were proper friends, and now Clay could text George during the day without feeling like he was touching something untouchable.

It’s possibly because George does look slightly untouchable - he belongs in the art galleries 404 steals from.

“...Because it wasn’t her fault for not knowing, but it’s not my fault for being *colorblind*,” George tells Clay, recounting when a substitute teacher had scolded him for getting the color of the grass wrong on an art assignment without knowing about his colorblindness. “It wasn’t even - I was just some ten-year-old!”

“She didn’t know?” Clay asks, glancing both ways as they crossed the streets. He feels his arm pressed against the sweated arm of George’s and Does Not think about it. “What did she - did you tell her? What happened?”

“It was so funny,” George lets out a small giggle at the memory, a glint in his eye as he remembers. “She felt so bad, she gave me A’s on my assignments for the rest of the year because I kept using it as an excuse.”

“You’re kind of evil,” Clay realizes, slowly turning to the villain next to him. “Ten year-old you guilt-tripped a grown woman for an entire school year, oh my God, you’re *evil*.”

George laughs at Clay’s horrified expression. “It was an easy pass! You would do it too.”

“I would *not*,” Clay denies, shaking his head. “I am a law abiding citizen who has never done wrong in his entire life.” He would probably go to jail if he wasn’t a superhero, but George didn’t need to know about that.

“I feel like,” he takes a turn to a street and Clay follows, “that’s not true. You’re a Florida man, yeah? You’ve probably committed a handful of crimes. Any man who likes pineapple on pizza has definitely committed atrocities.” George wasn’t *wrong*, but he didn’t have to say it like that.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Clay says, clearing his throat when George silently

raises an eyebrow.

"I'm sure." They keep walking, until George stops in front of a building, Clay nearly bumping into him before he realizes. "We're here."

He follows George into the building, taking a quick, sweeping view of the first floor as they make their way up to George's flat. Unsurprisingly, they don't run into anyone when they take the elevator, as it was eight a.m. on a Saturday, but the silence is nice when they stand next to each other in the ascending lift.

George's flat is on the fourth story up, and Clay follows closely as he leads them down the hallway. He waits as the other pulls out his keys, jingling as he shoves them into the keyhole and swings open the door. "It's kind of cluttered," he tells Clay when they walk in, "since I wasn't expecting guests."

George would probably have a heart attack at the sight that is his and Sapnap's shared apartment if he considers *this* cluttered; there were a few boxes in corners, but other than that, there was no proper mess, if the small hints of someone's being here was considered messy.

There's papers on the coffee table, and a few blankets thrown on the couch, which looks entirely enticing. Clay wants to sink into it and never get up, but that might have been the sleep-deprived part of him speaking.

Even with the lack of a mess, George seems slightly flustered as he putters around the living room, before remembering what he was here for. "Give me a second to grab my stuff," he hurries to say, before rushing to another room. Clay takes the privilege of looking around the room as the other man busies himself.

It was also clear of an art major living here; artworks of all sorts hung up on the wall, as well as a shelf consisting of many paints and sketchbooks, pushed against the wall. A collection of Harry Potter-esque items littered alongside a few books stood up on the shelf, in addition to small figurines and collectibles.

There were a few pictures scattered amongst the room; one, presumably with his family, and another of a gray-haired cat. The cat itself was nowhere to be found, but there were cat toys scattered in a corner, along with a small bed.

Clay finds himself trailing to the hallway, where a large painting holds itself on the wall; in delicate brush strokes, two figures stand in a flower field, peaks of yellow dotted along the mass of green in front of a pale blue sky.

One figure, in a dark green cloak, holds out a fistful of flowers to a crowned figure, and curiosity peaks in Clay at the sight. The art itself is undeniably impressive; the colors, muddy in some, bright in yellow, were captivating to say the least, and he couldn't wrap his mind around the molding of figures from light brush strokes.

Ever the lover of pretty things, Clay is slightly disappointed at a lack of a title or name, instead being supplied with a small signature in the corner.

"I've got my stuff," a voice speaks from behind, and Clay jumps in his spot, whirling around to see George. "Wow, you're jumpy."

"Not my fault you're unnervingly silent when you move." He spares a glance back at the painting. "Like a cat or something. Someone should put a bell on you."

“Were you looking at the painting?” George asks instead, peering at the artwork on the wall. “I forgot I had that up, actually. I painted that a while ago.”

Wait. “You painted this?” Clay turns to him, slightly unbelieving, because apparently he’s friends with every great artist reincarnated into one man. “I don’t - what the fuck, George.”

“What?” A blush slowly makes its way up George’s neck and to his face, and Clay’s eyes jump from the painting to him. “It’s not really -”

“*George*,” Clay interrupts, “you are a god with a paintbrush.”

The other man flushes and jabs at Clay’s shoulder. “Stop talking.”

“No, I’m serious!” Clay insists when they slowly walk back to the living room, George now with a fuller bag of supplies. “I, like, fell in love with that painting.” A smile threatens to spill on George’s lips with Clay’s insistent compliments, and he keeps pressing.

“You flatter me,” he mutters when they begin to leave the apartment once again, arms brushing still. Clay isn’t complaining.

“It’s only the truth, Georgie,” Clay promises as they walk together to George’s studio. He watches George sputter.

“Awful, you are,” he hears the other mutter, and can’t help the grin that dawns on his face.

“Yeah, but you still like me,” he sings, and George rolls his eyes.

They begin to walk, and Clay’s smile widens as George lightly pushes him.

“Unfortunately.”

Chapter End Notes

i do hope u all enjoyed this update:)

*the painting mentioned is actually a scene that i am writing for a quick one-shot!

hopefully i am able to post it sometime soon^^

pls always feel free to comment, kudos, and u can see me [here](#) or [here!](#)

the gift

Chapter Summary

"Want to go again?" Clay asks, placing his white pieces back in their original places. George purses his lips and shakes his head. "Not really. I'm getting tired of beating you."

"Hey, I am perfectly capable of beating you," Clay defends. "I just - choose not to."

"So you're a simp," George resolves.

Chapter Notes

kudos and comments my beloved<3

hi again everyone:) hope u are all doing ok, and here!! is another chapter, as a reward for getting thru this week!! so proud of u

i do hope u enjoy this just as much as the rest,

happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dream looks at the mountain of papers in front of him and mildly regrets existing.

"You're joking," he says more than asks, looking up to meet Wilbur's eyes, which are filled with everything besides sympathy. He's probably enjoying watching Dream suffer like this. "This is more pages than the English dictionary."

A stack of papers sits before him, every page filled from top to bottom with every single art installation from the past three years. Apparently, Dream did not realize how popular their town's art galleries were.

Now, regrettably, sits Dream in Wilbur's office, facing a thirty-page list of unfamiliar artists and art works that he has never heard of. He fights the urge to set the entire stack on fire, and then possibly himself. The papers stare back at him, silent, as if to say, *Your fault for being a grade-A dumbass and accepting this case. Should've accepted this massive L. Ha. Loser.*

He entirely agrees with it.

"Another day passes where I am so thankful that I am not you," Wilbur replies cheerily, collapsing into his own chair, across from Dream. "Surprisingly, our local art galleries garner more attention than previously assumed. Did you know that July and August are actually their busiest months?"

"Why would I know that," Dream sighs. He almost wishes he didn't have his mask on, just so he could properly facepalm. "Why didn't you just send an online copy? What reason was there to physically print this out?"

The other man shrugs. "It's more dramatic this way." He forgets Wilbur was a theater kid.

Dream gives him a flat look. "How am I supposed to narrow this down?"

"That," he answers, "is your problem. While you deal with this," he pats the pile, "I am going to join Niki for a very pleasant lunch. Goodbye!"

Dream watches as Wilbur leaves him alone in the room. He heaves a deep breath, partially reconsidering if this entire recruitment was worth it, before remembering 404's cockiness when he had told Dream, *"I've never failed before."*

He decides then that he would rather eat his entire left arm than let this recruitment go, and, looking at the stack of papers before him, a newfound determination fills him.

"I got this," he tells the stack of papers, which does not respond because paper is not sentient. Half of him wonders if he's only trying to convince himself.

Dream's phone buzzes, and he nearly jumps out of his skin before fishing it out of his bag.

sapnap

please come home there was a centipede on the wall and it ran away and now i don't know where it went

Dream sighs, the newfound determination slowly slinking away.

Weakly, he repeats, "I got this."

It is nearly three weeks later that Clay decides he does not "got this".

"Why did you bring an entire thesaurus out to dinner," Skeppy questions, reaching over to grab Clay's empty plate. "Single people are getting real desperate."

Clay wants to simply bash his head into the table. "I'm not *that* lonely." He fights the urge to throw his pen at the waiter's face. "It's for my job."

Skeppy snorts, refilling his glass of water. "Some job you've got," he comments, "you make this minimum-wage job look ideal. Suddenly the next hour of my shift is so much more bearable." He lightly pats Clay's shoulder. "Thanks for the boost of motivation!"

"Is my suffering only ever a comfort to you," Clay dryly inquires, already knowing the answer.

Skeppy doesn't pretend to think about it. "Yeah."

Why did he even ask, Clay internally questions as he flips Skeppy off, although the other man is already heading back to the kitchen, an airy laugh as he walks away.

Sometimes he wonders if he needs better friends. The side of extra food he got from Skeppy from time to time is enough to have him stay friends with the waiter, although it was sometimes out of pity, which Clay wasn't complaining about, and especially not now, at two a.m. on a Thursday night.

Really, Clay *felt* pitiful. He had just come back from a mission; there'd been a break in at a local music shop, and though it was a quick saving - raccoons were pretty bad robbers, after all, although their weirdly human hands were actually kind of good at picking locks - Clay still found himself

undoubtedly hungry, and with a second glance back to the direction of his apartment, he had taken the stack of papers in his bag to the diner.

He'd brought along his laptop as well, making his own document of artists and their works, slowly sifting his way through who was a definite *no* on the list. Some artists were an easy pass, with some being so clearly not the man he was looking for. Other artists, however, were much more difficult to find, some too small to have an easy Google search, others submitting works under anonymous aliases.

Reasonably, Clay knows that 404 had probably submitted his art under an alias of sorts, but he finds himself still going through every artist with a full name, just in case. There was no *reasonable* when it came to 404.

In the last three weeks, Clay has managed to whittle down the first forty pages of the list to eight, filled with anonymous submissions and artists he was not quite sure on. Many were found to be easy to mark off the list, so many factors when considering if the submission was 404, whether it be too old, too far away, or too physically-incapable-of-being-a-lanky-white-man.

Clay has no clue whether or not 404 had meant this to be easier than it is. Most of him blames this situation on Wilbur, merely out of convenience, and also because his current state of misery is partly Wilbur's fault. Most of his misery is usually Wilbur's fault.

(Some of his misery was also caused by 404, who Dream had last seen a few nights ago, when he had cornered the art thief into a room, holding some sort of art piece in one hand while he crossed his arms. It was a wooden carving that looked awfully like Tom Brady. He has no idea why it was worth thirteen million dollars.

"At least give me a hint," Dream had whined, tapping his foot impatiently.

404 shook his head, refusing adamantly. "Absolutely not. I'm already risking going to jail by joining your dumb superhero league, the most you can do is gather up some braincells to solve a little mystery."

"Do I *look* like Sherlock Holmes to you," Dream stepped closer, mostly in the need to intimidate the other into possibly slipping. He towered over the other, and he found himself glad that he was the human equivalent to a skyscraper. His giraffe-like genes were officially good for something.

The intimidation worked to some degree, because 404 walked backward until his back hit the wall, trapping himself. "If we're being entirely honest, you'd most likely be Watson."

"And what? You would be Sherlock?" Dream questioned, slowly walking closer.

404 nodded. "Obviously. I'm the brains of every operation."

"Give me some sort of clue," Dream asked again, closer to 404 than he'd ever been at the moment. He's at an arm length away, and Dream could probably cage him in, if he wanted. He didn't want to, *obviously*, but still.

"Alright, *alright*, I'll give you a hint, just - stop getting so close," 404 gave in, quick to run to the side and away from Dream, who grinned in victory, punching a fist up in the air. "Fucking - calm down, *God*. Let me think."

His fingers lightly tapped his forearm as he thought, silence settling between them as Dream paced, waiting for the other to decide. The museum, dark, was haunting as he stared at 404, who faced up, looking at the ceiling thoughtfully.

"Alright, I've got it." Dream paused his pacing, turning to 404 in excitement. "The title," he paused for dramatic effect, "has got the letter 'U' in it."

Despite the ambiguity of such a statement, Dream was still pleased at the crumb of helpfulness from 404. "I got this in the bag," he announced confidently, leaning onto a marble pillar.

"From that single clue?" 404 questioned, seemingly amused.

"Don't make fun of me," Dream scowled. "Do you have any idea how many artworks are put up for display every year?"

He crossed his arms. "Yeah."

"Alright, well, I don't care," Dream turned away. "I'm going to find that painting."

404 snorted.

"If that single clue helped you so much, the painting is going to stay unfound.")

However, unlike his earlier confidence, Clay was quickly realizing how useless the clue was.

He wasn't sure what in the *world* 404 was thinking when he had given the clue to Clay, because it was almost entirely unhelpful. He's never had to think about how many 'U' s there were in words. It was haunting him in his sleep.

Lost in his own thoughts, Clay doesn't hear the jingle of bell, nor the nearing footsteps, until he's abruptly interrupted by the sound of the chair across from him, dragging noisily against the floor. He looks up.

"Hi," George says, face slightly flushed from walking in the August heat. He's dressed in a gray hoodie, with a pink shirt poking out from the collar.

He looks good. He always does. Clay is so glad no one can read his thoughts.

"Hi," he parrots back, blinking at the formality of the greeting. "What are you doing here?" *Not that he was complaining.*

"How do you mean," George lightly kicks Clay's ankle to prove a point. "This is my job." He doesn't even have a shift today. Clay tells him just so.

"You don't even have a shift today, what do *you* mean," he counters, and then receives another kick to the ankle.

"Shut up." George glances at the papers placed on the table between the two of them, and raises an eyebrow. "Why are *you* here?"

"Because you're here," Clay grins, even after he receives a harsher kick to the ankle. He's definitely going to bruise at this point, and he wouldn't even be mad.

Simp, an inner voice tells him. Clay wonders if he's going crazy. It would be about time.

George wrinkles his nose, although his lips are upturned. "Anyways," he continues, ignoring Clay's smug expression like he usually does, "I think you should come over."

Him now being here makes narrowing the list down so much less enticing than it already was, and Clay doesn't need to think twice about it as begins to save the changes to his document. "Come

over where?"

"My apartment," George gives him a look, like it was obvious. Clay throws a straw wrapper at him.

He tucks the papers back into their folder, feeling the other's eyes on him. Hives of bees suddenly have found home in his body. "Sure. When?"

"Right now." Clay's hands stutter for a second, slightly alarmed at how bold the waiter was being, before realizing nothing about it was exactly *bold*. He was just inviting Clay over to hang out, like bros do. They were homies who were going to hang out on a Thursday night, like Sapnap and Clay do all the time. Granted, Clay does not want to passionately kiss Sapnap on the lips - at least, not romantically. Right. Anyways.

"It's nearly three a.m.," he tells George, as if it matters. It does not.

George pauses, as if to wait, before gesturing for him to continue. "Are you coming or not?"

Clay blinks. "Yeah, okay."

He ends up on George's apartment floor, chessboard between the two of them while Wall-E plays in the background - a decision made by neither of them, mysteriously.

They've got company with the empty takeout boxes next to them they were too lazy to put away, who watch while Clay pathetically loses another rook. It's almost six a.m. now, having walked from the diner to George's apartment complex and passing the past few hours in a haze. With no sleep from the past day, Clay really should be tired, but he finds himself wide awake when George's socked foot, outstretched, pokes at his knee. He pokes back with a discarded knight.

"Your move," George says, and he moves his pawn.

They'd ordered food when George made the executive decision that it was too late for either of them to cook a proper dinner, and, as they both talked over Wall-E being transported into space, later found their common interest in chess, all while Clay had tried to ignore their knees pressing against each other on the sofa. He failed miserably, but he'd like it on record that he tried.

Now here he sits, losing two to four while George leans over and places his stolen rook to the side of the chessboard. He had taken off his hoodie at some point ("God, I'm so hot," he had whined, pulling it off. "Oh, we *know*, George," Clay teased, and received a soy sauce packet to the face), now clad in a pink shirt, and his hair is a little mussed. He looks soft. Huggable. Clay desperately wants to hold his hand.

"Your move," George informs him again, after moving a knight, with a smile on his lips that says he knows he's already won. Clay can't find it in him to be a sore loser, though, not with George's smile brightening his entire face, the corners of his eyes crinkle when he grins in victory. Clay can feel himself falling apart.

Sapnap would definitely call him a loser, and honestly? Deserved.

George tips over a stolen pawn.

Clay looks down at his last two white pawns and his lone king. He's definitely lost. "You're

cracked, what the heck.”

“You just suck really bad,” George quips, and Clay is briefly reminded of 404 frowning at him. He watches as a black queen piece is placed three spaces before his king. “Your chess skills are literally unfound.” A pause. “Check.”

“What the fuck.” He moves his king to the right. George’s smile grows smugger.

A black bishop moves. “Checkmate.”

“I am going to riot,” Clay announces, despite having expected this, falling backward and onto the floor. The ceiling has a few glow-in-the-dark stars he used to have as a kid. It’s nice. He and George should stargaze like in the movies. He wonders if George would let him point out constellations. “I’m throwing the board out the window, followed by myself.”

“Should’ve tried not losing.” George calmly places the chess pieces back to their positions, accidentally knocking down half of them when his phone buzzes, causing him to startle. He looks slightly put out when a pawn rolls away, and Clay leans over to grab it for him before it rolls under the couch.

Their fingers brush when he passes it to George. Clay very determinedly pretends it does not happen, for his own sake. He is barely holding it together.

"Want to go again?" Clay asks, placing his white pieces back in their original places. A bishop rolls away and under the sofa. Goddamn it.

George purses his lips and shakes his head. "Not really. I'm getting tired of beating you."

"Hey, I am perfectly capable of beating you," Clay defends, reaching under the couch to retrieve the bishop. At the quirk of an eyebrow, he adds, hesitantly, "I just - choose not to."

"So you're a simp," George resolves, placing the final chess piece back where it belongs. "Admit it already."

Clay quickly shakes his head. "I will *not*. Because I'm not. A simp, I mean."

Despite George having invited Clay over, after ten minutes of cautious conversation, it was clear he had no proper plan of entertainment, moving from movies to food to chess, searching for another excuse to spend time together, as though Clay would leave after they ran out of things to do.

Clay didn't mind. He was content simply being with George.

Exhaustion makes itself apparent as a yawn escapes him, and he wipes at his face. In contrast to being so awake a few moments ago, he was suddenly tired, six a.m. hitting differently than it did before.

A craving to curl up in something soft overtakes him, and Clay looks up at the sofa he's been leaning against, the same he had noted to be too enticing for his own good the first time he had been in George's apartment.

He indulges himself and crawls up to the sofa, groaning at the effort of giving up. His hardships are worth it, though, when he finds it is as soft as it looks. He automatically sinks into it and establishes it as his new permanent home.

George stands up from the floor, moving the chessboard back to the shelf, before standing in front of Clay, slightly to the left of the television. Wall-E is on its second run now, as the screen depicts Wall-E and Eve dancing through space. If only he and George could join them without immediately dying at the lack of oxygen.

“What do we do now?” George asks, hands placed on his hips. He looks kind of ridiculous, but still unfairly attractive. Most of his hair is brushed to the left, a stray strand refusing to cooperate and sticks to the middle of his forehead. Clay’s fingers twitch, wanting to get up and brush it away. Ultimately, he decides not to do that because that would be *weird* - unless George let him, but he wouldn’t. Obviously. Probably. He needs to stop thinking.

George is still standing, oblivious to Clay’s conversation with himself. There is a slight frown on his face as he tries to think of something else to do.

“We don’t have to do anything,” Clay offers, sudden tiredness washing over his body. Late nights seem to catch up to him at the worst of times. He wants to force away the exhaustion, to spend as much time as he could with George, *awake*, but he can feel his eyelids drooping against his will.

It didn’t help staying up all night last night, trying to narrow down the list of art works, or the fact George’s apartment was so - comfortable. His apartment was different at night; he had several lamps and lights placed amongst the room, as if George was attempting to do everything he could to avoid turning on the overhead light. Clay wasn’t complaining, as the atmosphere was then made more intimate. A space of just him and George.

He watches as George’s frown deepens. Clay has a fleeting thought of kissing it away, and he can feel his own cheeks warming at the thought. He immediately reprimands himself for the heinous crimes his mind has committed, willing his blush to go away before George notices. Every day is a chance for him to become more embarrassing, apparently.

“I feel like we should be doing something.”

Clay makes a muffled noise, face stuffed into the couch, attempting to become one with the couch. “You always feel like that. We don’t have to do stuff to just, you know, hang out.” He pulls the blanket that had been residing on the couch over him, drawing up his legs. George’s eyes are on him, but he isn’t as nervous as he usually is. His insides are kind of tingly, though. It might be the sleep deprivation.

“I don’t know, it feels weird just sitting around,” George chews on his bottom lip, looking around his apartment, and his fingers tap against his arm. He is too far away for Clay’s liking.

“You’re allowed to relax, you know,” He says through the blanket, half his lower face covered. “You can just chill.”

“Yeah, I know, it’s just,” he cuts himself off, shrugging. “I don’t know.”

Clay pats the space next to him. “C’mere.”

George obeys, slowly shuffling closer to the couch where Clay is close to passing out, lost hours of sleep coming back to bite. His knees hit the edge of the couch, and he looks awkward, unsure what to do with himself. Clay peels back the blanket, offering space for George to join him under it.

When George doesn’t immediately sit down, Clay makes an uncontended noise, wrapping a hand over George’s wrist. He pulls him in, bringing George closer than he had intended. The other man yelps as his body smushes against Clay, who is too tired to properly panic over their close

proximity. He'll probably think about this during his morning classes.

"Oh - my God," he scoots, allowing a little space between himself and Clay, "what is this."

"What's all this then?" He mimics, and lets out a laugh at his own bad impression of a British accent.

George doesn't look amused. "What are we doing," he asks in an overly enunciated American accent, flicking at Clay's face, who pretends to immediately die at the contact. He does die on the inside, however.

"Just chilling," Clay says as an answer. He tosses the blanket over George's body, and lets his eyes fall shut.

He can feel George adjusting himself so he wouldn't be completely leaning onto him, but the positioning of Clay makes it so that George topples over anyways, stuck with having half his body melting into him. Clay certainly doesn't mind, and he hopes George doesn't either.

After a few moments of rustling, George sighs quietly, stilling next to him. His bare arm presses against Clay's, and he *is* warm; his hands have always been cold in the sparse amount of times they have ever made contact with him, but the rest of George is warm and welcoming. A human heater. Clay wants to draw him closer.

"Are you falling asleep?" George whispers for no reason, the air of his words lightly hitting Clay's neck. He resists the urge to turn, tuck his face into the other's hair. He resolves with having one arm around George's middle, where George had landed on the sofa and onto Clay's arm.

"No," Clay whispers back, slowly falling asleep. "We're just chilling." *In Cedar Rapids*, a voice that strangely sounds like Quackity supplies in his mind, and he almost laughs to himself like a lunatic.

"Just chilling?" George asks, amusement evident in his voice.

"Duh," he replies. "What else would we be doing," he adds, not really a question.

George's shoulder moves against his arm as he shrugs. "Falling asleep?"

"No," Clay is quick to deny, "no falling asleep." Somewhere, in his sleep-driven mind, he finds it a good idea to tighten his one-arm hold around George's middle. George tenses, and regret quickly courses through Clay, until he slowly relaxes back into his hold. Someone needs to tell him to stop being bold, before he combusts like a human firework and ruins George's apartment.

Bringing his other arm to properly wrap himself around George is probably a bad idea. He considers it anyways, before the small, somewhat conscious part of him rejects the idea. *Human firework*, he reminds himself. He doesn't want to go too far - he knows George is touchy with touching.

"No falling asleep," George quietly repeats, "okay."

"Okay."

George shifts. "I have to go to my studio soon."

"No talking," Clay uses the arm not wrapped around George to pat his chest.

“I really -”

“No,” Clay presses his face further into the sofa, “just chill.”

Silence, until finally, “Fine. Just chilling, then.”

A brief smile presses itself onto Clay’s lips. He pats George’s chest again, just to make sure he’s still there.

“Just chill.”

Four days later, it’s a late Sunday, or early Monday, if one were to be technical about it, when Clay throws all fifty pages of the list away into the recycling bin, and starts to review the four-page document on his laptop.

Every column was filled with anonymous aliases, with paintings he has yet to see, and with people who he doesn’t know, and at this point, he doesn’t think he wants to.

Over the past few days, Clay has taken into consideration of the last hint 404 had offered -

(“It’s been nearly four weeks, why haven’t you found the painting,” 404 says as a greeting, and something tells Dream that he wasn’t really expecting him to find the painting at all. A bronze figure stands behind him, 404’s target of the day, but he can’t find himself to care right now.

“In my defense,” he begins, “I have to narrow down a fifty page list, and with only one actual clue, and that was that it had the letter ‘U’ in it, which is a very popular letter, apparently.”

404 hums. “I’ve definitely given you more hints than that.”

“You did *not*,” Dream protests, letting his head fall back. “How am I supposed to know what’s a hint and what’s not?”

He watches the art thief shrug. “Not my fault you’re dense.”

“One more hint,” Dream asks (read: begs, but he’d like to hang on to the last strand of dignity he has left, thanks), “and I’ll stop asking.” At 404’s skeptical tilt of the head - which is quite impressive, he didn’t know a head movement could be so skeptical - he adds, “I promise!” He prided himself on his ability to keep promises - sure, it had taken him three years to return Sapnap’s laptop after promising him he’d return it, but he *had* kept to his promise.

After a long, considering silence, 404 sighs. “I’m taking your promise with a grain of salt,” he ignores the hurt noise from Dream, “but I’ll give you a clue anyways, just because you’re being increasingly annoying.”

Dream jumps in his spot, raising both arms in success. “My inability to give up finally paid off!”

“You’re like an overexcited puppy,” 404 notes, leaning back onto the wall. “A golden retriever but worse.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Dream declares, too excited for the next clue to actually care. “I had a golden retriever as a kid. He was my best friend.” Alright, so maybe he did fit every American nuclear-family stereotype. Sue him for being typical.

“Of course you did,” 404 mutters, before straightening. “Alright, I’ve got it. You’ve played - have you played chess before?”

Dream nods eagerly. “I have. I’m great at chess.” Well, okay. He thinks back to losing to George five times in one night, and reconsiders his last statement. Maybe not *great*.

404 is apparently a psychic, because he says, “I have a feeling you’re not.” Dream doesn’t argue. 404 lightly taps his forearm, thinking. “What is the common goal of chess?”

“To capture the king?” Dream answers with a question, furrowing his eyebrows. He slowly puts it together when he realizes, “*Oh*, your painting is about a king!”)

- and narrows down quite a few artworks.

Clay has found that many artworks were also not available with a simple search online and instead require a visit to the gallery itself, because it seems like life itself was out to get him. It wasn’t like he could eliminate a painting from the list with just the title - some titles had nothing to do with the actual painting, because artists were edgy like that, and others offered no idea as to what the painting really was.

Nonetheless, even with the great amount of filtering Clay had done, there were still so many he had yet to narrow down, and the next time he’d see 404 was a week and a half away. This seemed like a lot of time, but really, the action of going from one art gallery to the next, hunting down paintings and then later deciding which one had been made by 404 would definitely take up most of his time.

This was not even to mention him being an overridden college student, who was desperately trying to keep up with superhero duties and also homework. He doesn’t know why he does this to himself.

A yawn overtakes him, and Clay rubs his eyes warily as he remembers his morning classes of tomorrow. God, he hates college. And being in debt. Essentially everything college stands for.

Looking at the shining 3:09 A.M. on his alarm clock, Clay shuts off his laptop and resolves to go to bed.

“It’s your birthday Thursday, right?” George asks, sounding oddly timid.

Clay looks up from the cat painting on the floor at the sound of his voice, meeting George’s eyes across the studio.

The studio, being George’s, is a flurry of art supplies and art works. Paints of all sorts occupy an entire wall of shelves, a paint-splattered tarp protecting the hardwood floor, and the sort of mess that had been absent from George’s apartment was very clearly expressed here.

Even with the mess, nevertheless, it was charming, an expression of its own as George seems to be even more nervous than he had been when showing Clay his apartment for the first time. George looks like he’d been through a whirlwind of paint himself, a streak of purple on his right cheek when he wipes at it. It was incredibly endearing, and Clay had promptly decided not to tell him about it.

George had been cleaning his brushes in a nearby sink when Clay arrived, shortly after receiving a

text to meet George here with an address attached as an afterthought.

Clay would have been nervous at the lack of reason, but he's found that George just - likes to spend time together, with or without a reason. After essentially forcing him to spend time simply sitting together, George was no longer reluctant to text him an invitation to his apartment, with no actual goal in mind besides existing together. They've spent several nights together - not like that, *obviously* - and often did they end up doing separate things, whether that be Clay coding while George sketches, or falling asleep on the couch together.

He'd be lying if Clay said he didn't look forward to spending hours with George, no matter what they did. He couldn't get bored with the other around, no matter how cliché he sounded. He *likes* George and all that he has to offer, for all the heaviness his heart contains at the sight of him.

"The twelfth, yeah," Clay confirms, nodding. "Why?"

"I," George's face slowly grew pink, "have something for you."

Something sweet and warm bursts in Clay's chest, and he can't tell if it's from heart palpitations or the thought of getting a gift from *George*. "You really didn't have to do that."

"Of course I did," George rolls his eyes, "what kind of person would I be if I didn't get you a birthday gift?"

"You're already a gift," Clay says naturally, laughing when George huffs in exasperation.

"You do too much." His voice is slightly muffled when he leans into another, small storage room. He's on his tip-toes, reaching up for something, and Clay has half a mind to offer a hand, before George falls back down on his heels, a canvas in hand.

He hands it to Clay, looking quite embarrassed. "Here."

It's in a style much similar to the first painting he's seen of George's, placed in the hallway of his apartment where he had fallen in love with it. Maybe that's why George had painted this one in the same way; broad brushstrokes in the background, with clean and confident lines of paint that shape out figures.

Someone with hair not unlike Clay's stands in the straight middle, deep red roses blooming out of their obscured face, and slow swirls of color enraptured him. Their neck holds necklaces, much similar to his, with the same silver chains and design, and their build is almost just the same as him too, and some part of him wonders if he's self projecting when he looks up at George.

"Is this," Clay pauses, "is this me?" He could *feel* his hopes rising, and had to forcibly push them down. He, unfortunately, did not live in a sappy fanfiction.

"It's supposed to be, yeah," George admits, and nevermind, maybe he did. "You mentioned roses as your favorite flowers, so I," he gestures, "did that. I don't know."

He does remember mentioning liking roses, once, during one of their many late conversations at the diner, when Clay had just come back from a mission and with an empty stomach. The thought of George remembering such small details about him has his insides turn to honey. He can feel himself deteriorating.

Clay's mouth opens, futile attempts to express the weird sensations going through his heart right now, as the words keep clumping together in his throat. "I don't," he struggles, "why -"

He looks down at the painting, and then up at the painter wordlessly, until he sets down the painting and moves toward George, wrapping his arms around his middle and into a hug. He pulls the other close, hoping it's enough to translate the mess that George turns him into.

He worries when the other stiffens, and almost begins to move away, until George tentatively reaches up to return the hug. Clay grows warm, not unlike the sun, and tightens his hold.

George vaguely smells like laundry and shampoo when Clay holds him under his chin, close against his chest. He hopes George can't hear his thundering heart, which threatens to beat out of his chest with how it was racing inside him, overwhelmed by their close proximity.

He only pulls away because almost fifty seconds of silent hugging is probably socially unacceptable, but he'd hold on longer if it were up to him. George's face is slightly flushed, and understandably so, as Clay hadn't properly asked if hugging him was okay. Still, he smiles at Clay, so maybe it wasn't a terrible move on his part.

"George," he says gravely, placing both hands on the other's shoulders, "I would risk it all for you."

He turns pink at Clay's words, a smile creeping up on his face. "You're an idiot."

"George," Clay grins, "I'm going to fall in love with you at this rate."

He is quick to shake his head, slightly pushing at Clay's chest as George moves away. "Shut *up*. Just say you like the painting and go."

"I like the painting almost as much as I like you," Clay tells him, picking up the painting again. "I am never letting go of it."

"You're an idiot," George says again, and Clay can't ignore the fondness in his voice.

Clay's cheeks hurt from smiling so hard.

"I'll be your idiot," he presses, and receives a swat to the shoulder. It's entirely worth it.

Chapter End Notes

george looked so incredibly good in the pink shirt, i had to mention it:) there are a few more hints that i scattered in this chapter, and by next chapter i think itll b more obvious! if u can spot them already, that is very cool!!!! also! i have created a [tumblr](#) (bc twitter scares me) that u can follow:) only if u would like!!
- [ironically, i have just made a twitter](#)
as always, feel free to comment, kudos, and u can see me [here](#) or [here](#)!

the art thief

Chapter Summary

Sapnap freezes. "We're stealing paintings?"

"Only if it could be 404's," Dream explains, tugging on Sapnap's arm when he doesn't move. "Come on, it's not like you've never stolen before."

"Maybe like a pack of chips from a gas station, not a fucking million-dollar worth art piece from a museum!"

Chapter Notes

hello everyone!:)

i say this every time but i do appreciate every comment and kudos i receive!!!! its very kind of everyone who left either to do so, thanku!<3

happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Is it just me," Karl begins, "or is it getting hot in here?"

"Maybe because Sapnap's here," Quackity answers, grinning when Sapnap sends an exaggerated wink his way.

"The library is literally on fire." Dream says, slightly appalled at his friends' behavior as he pushes them out of the burning building, and how any of them were still alive was beyond him.

His morning was meant to have been dedicated to a few hours of chill studying, although with Sapnap, Karl, and Quackity, *chill* was the last word he'd use to describe his morning. Honestly, a burning library wasn't the worst outcome with all four of them together.

So here he was, pretending to be a superhero who happened to be in close proximity to a college campus, and *not* Clay, who had been studying with them fifteen minutes prior before having to head off to an "emergency work meeting".

It was ten minutes later that Dream ushered students out of the building, and this included his trio of friends, in which Sapnap sent a knowing look in his direction as he forced them out. This wasn't the first time Dream has had to save Sapnap, Karl, or Quackity, and it definitely wouldn't be the last.

Wednesdays were always the worst day of the week, and this point is proven time and time again, especially now, as Quackity takes the time to tell him, "You know, I still think Techno should have kicked your ass."

"I just saved your life, what the fuck," Dream gapes, watching as Karl loses it and Quackity jeers at his own joke. He should have left them back in the fire, and he tells them just so.

"I was born in fire, baby," Sappnap replies, with the confidence of a man who knows what he's talking about, and Dream fights the overwhelming urge to jump back into the building. He has no idea how all his friends ended up being morons.

He, instead of resulting in his own death, leads them out into the open street, where they would no longer be at risk of dying, which can be seen both as a good and bad thing.

Karl grins. "That explains why you're so *hot*." Quackity wolf-whistles, and it takes every cell in Dream's body to not smack all of them.

He lets out a long suffering sigh, raking a hand through his hair as he leaves the couple, walking back into the library to make sure no one else was in danger. Thankfully, most of the books were untouched, the fire having been started in the office and trailing to the front desk instead, away from the bookshelves.

A thorough search of the rest of the library confirms that the only people stupid enough to stay inside an on-fire building were just his friends, and a brief look-through of the office, where a box of donuts had set on fire, somehow, has Dream deciding to leave it up to the police. He was only there to save people, after all.

He is quick to leave the building, and returns back to the crowd of college students, consisting mostly of people irritated that their study sessions have been interrupted, or a few relieved ones that seem to appreciate the break.

Clay's morning was meant to have been preoccupied with studying for an upcoming exam, followed by a trip to the closest art gallery nearby, which held a few paintings that Dream still needs to check out. Instead, here he was, babysitting his three friends as they unashamedly flirted with each other. He wonders if anyone else in history has fourth-wheeled so badly before.

"Clay was lucky to leave when he did," Karl suddenly mentions, oblivious to his friend being right beside him. It was an unnerving coincidence, and Dream forces himself to calm down. None of his friends had enough brain cells to put two and two together.

Sappnap stifles a grin. "Yeah, super lucky," he says, looking directly at him. Dream contemplates murdering him right then and there. Unfortunately, he couldn't pay for their rent all alone, and settles for sending glares that Sappnap couldn't see.

"What the fuck is your mask," Quackity suddenly asks, and Dream wonders if his friends only exist to annoy the shit out of him, both as Clay and Dream. "That's creepy as hell."

"It's just a smiley face! What do you have against smiley faces," Dream protests, feeling mildly offended.

He shrugs. "You look like a fucked up emoji." Karl giggles, trying to smother his laughter with a hand. Dream, not for the first time, considers murder.

"If I could send you back into the burning building, I would."

Despite such a rocky morning, however, the rest of his day could be considered pleasant - or as pleasant as a morning spent inside a burning building could be. It would be suffice to say he has no actual idea on what is pleasant or not anymore.

After the firemen arrive, he heads to one of the many art galleries he has yet to visit, with a list of artworks he has yet to see. Even with the massive cuts of artworks he has committed, there are still too many to properly deduct which painting belongs to 404.

However, the hunt for the painting wasn't completely hopeless; after digging his way through all nearby art galleries and inspecting the artworks he has yet to have seen, the search became slightly easier, as most of the names on the list Clay hadn't been sure about turned out to be fairly easy to cross off the list.

Majority had nothing to do with royalty, and Clay felt a small portion of weight slide off his chest every time he crossed a title of his list. Some also catered to that of royal families, and Clay was quite sure that it wasn't what 404 had hinted towards, after running through their conversation several times over in his mind, and the specific mentioning of a *king*. Many also focused on queens instead of kings, and those were also immediately crossed off.

The following week leads Dream to three paintings.

1. *Forgetful* by Anonymous

"You know, sometimes I'm like, wow, I'm so glad I met Clay back in middle school, because even though he once set our kitchen on fire, I love him like a brother," Sapnap rants, climbing up the side of the building, narrowly missing a ledge and almost falling to his death, "and I wouldn't trade him for a million bucks."

Dream pauses as he forces a window open. "That is definitely not true."

Sapnap ignores him. "Right now, though," he watches as Dream cheers in satisfaction when the window swings open, "I wish we never met."

"You're so dramatic," Dream snorts, ducking into the art gallery and motioning Sapnap to follow.

"We are *literally* committing a crime right now." He looks around the room, one with tall vases and glass boxes. It looks like Home Depot. "Which, to be clear, was your idea. I want that on record."

Trespassing into a closed art gallery in the middle of the night with his best friend *was* Dream's idea; it would be more efficient, after all, to have two people look through a list of over fifty artworks in a very large gallery.

Despite all his grumbling and complaining, he knows that Sapnap doesn't hate joining him. He'd accepted quite readily, too, although that was before he knew they were going to be breaking in.

"Doesn't your superhero privilege let you into establishments whenever you want?" Sapnap asks, groaning when he hits his arm on the window frame and tripping into the room in a very graceful manner. Dream laughs at him, because he deserves it.

"I mean, technically, yeah," Dream strolls into the hallway, and Sapnap pulls out the printed list from his pocket. "But then they would know I was the one who stole any paintings of theirs."

Sapnap freezes. "We're stealing paintings?"

"Only if it could be 404's," Dream explains, tugging on Sapnap's arm when he doesn't move. "Come *on*, it's not like you've never stolen before."

"Maybe like a pack of chips from a gas station, not a fucking million-dollar worth art piece from a *museum*!" Sapnap's voice gets a little shrill at the end, until he entirely deflates. "You're so lucky we're homies."

"I love you?" Dream offers, laughing when Sapnap makes as if to kiss him.

Both of them are thankful that the art gallery, unnaturally, does not have any wandering security guards. An unwise decision, sure, but absolutely appreciated by the duo as they race through the halls without a worry about the noise they're making.

Spending an evening in the after hours of a close art gallery is in many ways fun, and even more so with Sapnap, as they hunt down each painting on the list, one by one, both tackling half the list. None quite catch his or Dream's eye, as many do not line up with the sparse amount of hints that were supplied by 404. Some titles that had suggested king-like themes have no relevance to the painting itself, and those that do have a theme of royalty often include those with queens, princes, princesses, or knights.

Dream feels like 404 was abundantly clear with the inclusion of only a king. If he did fail to mention the presence of anything besides a king, however, Dream is royally screwed, because he disregards those easily, and crosses them off the list without hesitation. It wasn't *his* fault 404 had decided to be all cryptic with other hints.

There are only two left on the list when the clock strikes five a.m., with Sapnap a few rooms away while Dream chases the remaining paintings down. The first one, titled *Juxtaposition of Knights and Kings*, thankfully, or maybe not thankfully, doesn't include kings or knights at all, and is instead a painting of canned tuna. Dream won't pretend to know what that means.

The last one on his list, *What Is Uncommonly Offered in Royalty*, is a canvas depicting a small house, set aflame with blazing oranges and reds, and Dream both feels accomplished and let down when he slices the title in half with a pen. He tucks the papers into his back pocket and steps back out into the hallway, hoping Sapnap didn't get too far away while they've been apart.

A few paintings on the hallway walls capture his attention as he looks around, and Dream nearly walks into Sapnap when he appears in front of him, waving his hands urgently.

"Look at my last one," he tells him, Dream slightly jogging to catch up with his hurried pace. They walk into a large room with large paintings, golden frames and oil paints. He stumbles to a slower walk when he follows Sapnap further into the room, until they pause in front of a painting, a golden plaque placed dutifully underneath it.

In smooth, fluid lines is a tall, lean figure - a man, presumably, merged in white and black, as though dipped in one color paint on each side. He, with pointy ears and a gleaming, crooked crown perched on his head, lays in a field of purple flowers, eyes shut and looking at peace. His hair is parted in the middle, with one side black and their other white, and sparse jewelry on his body.

His hands are worn, though. The king, or prince, he looks slightly too young to be a king, holds a worn, leather book to their chest, laid dearly in the midst of flowers. Dream wonders what's in it.

Forgetful, the golden plaque tells him, the lack of an artist's name suggesting an anonymous submission, and he and Sapnap exchange looks.

"I think this could be it," Sapnap says as they both stare at the painting.

Dream nods, chewing on his bottom lip consideringly. "We should take it."

Sapnap squints. "Okay, but you're carrying it home. And if we get caught, *you're* taking all the blame."

They head home, and place it against Clay's dresser.

2. *The Unearthed Tyrant* by Time Turner

Dream finds the next painting on Tuesday, alone this time because Sapnap has a “love life” or whatever it is.

He arrives at the museum much earlier than he did last time, because he no longer has someone else to tackle half the list for him. Still, he strides into the halls with determination, because he *will* find this painting, no matter how long it takes him.

The gallery is one that he’s been to before, actually; one of the few of their town’s that Dream has visited in his own time, when it had been a melancholy autumn day, and Clay was in need of entertainment, because being single and sad was not an appropriate pass time.

That was how he found himself in the building, standing in front of art amongst a crowd of families and pretentious people who had too much free time on their hands. He had spent an approximate two hours before he had gone home, feeling pretty satisfied, actually.

Nonetheless, it was a beautiful gallery; one of high arches and even higher painted ceilings, with marble flooring and expensive tickets to get in. It was reasonably expensive, but tonight, it’s completely free for Dream, who broke in. Because he could.

A marble statue eerily gazes at him as he walks into the room, and he groans when it’s another room vacant of any paintings. The building is not unlike the workings of Daedalus; the hallways stretch long, and the night seems even longer as Dream keeps glancing at his watch, anxious for it to turn eight and give him an excuse to give up.

He mindlessly hums under his breath, if only for what little entertainment he could provide for himself as he strolls leisurely through the realism section of the gallery. Not many paintings caught his eye, since they were not the paintings he was looking for, and he’s never been one for unnaturally detailed oil paintings of fruit.

Dream’s list for this gallery holds fourteen paintings, and isn’t that bad in the grand scheme of things. Every single painting he’s come across, he has dutifully crossed off, after none of them have fit the necessary requirements to offer more than an eyebrow raise and a marking of a pen. It should be relieving, but it mostly makes him nervous for the gradual shortening of the list.

He taps his pen against his exposed chin, chewing on his inner cheek as he looks around for the last four paintings. They’re all ambiguous in their titles, offering no actual idea as to what the painting could actually be. Thankfully, however, all of them have a proper artist attached as well, although only two hold real, legal names.

Dream drops his pen, and groans as he leans down to pick it up. Stretching, he continues to walk, until pausing in front of another room. He steps in, eyes skirting as they brush over each plaque, and exhaustion wears at his edges, until he freezes.

A tall frame of a painting stands over him, a long portrait of a man with goat horns - ram horns, maybe - poking out of his skull, a slightly maniacal gleam in his eye when he peers over a broken city. The depiction is in harsh lines and paint strokes, unlike the previous painting, as though the painter was urgent in painting the image, lest it disappear from their mind forever.

The Unearthed Tyrant, the title tells him, and Dream can’t certainly tell if the man was a king, a dictator, or simply a leader - there is no crown atop his head, but there are several on the ground, littered around his feet as though they were trash, some bloodied and some pristine. He takes this as enough to assume it was probably some sort of social commentary on monarchy, and debates taking it home.

The debate lasts five seconds, because Dream would rather be safe than sorry, and unhooks it from its place in the wall. He hurriedly checks out the last three paintings, glad that no other paintings fit the criteria, and makes his way out of the building.

It's a hassle to drag home, in the dark when no one is meant to see a masked figure carry a five-foot painting out of an art gallery and home. His arms are slightly sore when he holds it a few inches above the ground, the heavy frame offering no sympathy as his arms are slowly being drained of all life. It's entirely worth it, though when he perches it against the couch in his and Sapnap's living room, facing out.

It's also incredibly funny when Sapnap, still sleepy and not at his best, shrieks at the unexpected painted guest first thing in the morning.

3. *The Unfound King* by Anonymous

Three a.m. finds Dream on the floor of another art gallery, and at this point, he was getting sick of finding himself in them. Once again, he considers quitting this job.

Really, it was a terrible idea to take a break. Unlike the previous ones, this one held a security guard; one that he knew would not be happy about Dream's being here. Most people weren't.

Dream, unfortunately, did not know about this security guard until forty minutes ago, when he had nearly ran into them headfirst, and narrowly avoided exposing himself by slyly hiding behind an oddly shaped sculpture. Maybe he did have to bend his body in ways it was not meant to in order to hide, but at least he didn't get caught.

Now sat Dream, on the floor as he tries to come up with a plan to get through what he came here for, while also not getting arrested for trespassing, which should be easy enough. Contrary to popular opinion, Dream *was* competent enough to get away with crime. Most of what he did would be considered criminal behavior - not that the police needed to particularly know of that.

He had grabbed a brochure of the art gallery, which also held a map of sorts to outline the building. He pulls out his pen and stares at his current location, currently in the *Photography* section. The nearest section holding paintings was just a few rooms away, which was, undoubtedly, blocked off by the security guard, if their loud footsteps and low humming was anything to go by.

Dream frowns in concentration. He could slip through the front room, where he could head from there and to the upper floor, take the stairs down to the room full of pottery, and slink past the security guard a room away in order to get into the *Painting* section.

It would be fairly easy. He's *got* this.

Dream huffs a breath as he forces himself up on his feet, slightly wobbling when he stretches. He's been tired all week, dedicating all night to finding this stupid painting, and all day to college and maintaining whatever social life he has left, which - wasn't *a lot*, but he'd rather not think about that.

He tucks the map and list in one pocket, and the pen in another. Poking his head out into the hallway, he spots the security guard further in the hallway, head facing the other direction as they walk away from where Dream stood, flipping a flashlight in one hand.

Dream takes this chance to hurry across the hallway, from one room to another, and run into the front room, where a vacant front desk sat, as well as a large staircase leading upward. It was also oddly open, multiple doorways leading into the room, and he spares no time rushing up the stairs,

feeling anxious at the prospect of being unable to keep a watchful eye on all exits.

The staircase is unreasonably long, testing Dream's fitness and patience while he climbs up the steps, glad that such a job requires being fit when he reaches the top, somewhat out of breath. "Holy *shit*," he mutters, leaning over on the railing as he catches his breath.

The opening of a glass door makes him freeze, and Dream looks around to see the security guard stroll in, not having noticed him just yet. He widens his eyes behind his mask, quickening his pace when he races deeper into the second floor, out of view. He'd forgotten that the security guard had *legs*, which he could *use*.

Dream passes large pictures and drawings as he walks past, peering into rooms as he tries to find the *Pottery* room, frustration building when it's another room full of ancient vases, not unlike the one 404 had stolen so long ago. The thought makes him more determined, and he straightens as he keeps searching.

The relief surging through Dream is incomparable when he finally finds the room full of pottery, the sounds of the security guard's footsteps growing closer as he reaches the room. He wastes no time to take the stairs, impatience as he hops down the last few steps.

There is no need to sneak in the hallway when the security guard is still upstairs, but Dream maintains a level of quietness anyways, making sure to avoid as much noise as humanly possible as he strides into the *Painting* section, satisfaction flowing in his veins as he looks around. He digs the list out of his back pocket, fingering the pen with his gloved-hands as he chews on his bottom lip in consideration.

He's grateful that there's only seven paintings he needs to find left on the list, the last art gallery of the bunch. It also makes him incredibly nervous at the thought of having missed 404's painting from the many he has seen this week alone, but he's also quite sure he hasn't. Maybe this was as easy as 404 had intended.

Four out of seven have nothing to do with kings, queens, or anything of the sort, which he is glad for. One consists of a bloody queen, and another holds a depiction of a knight kneeling against a king. The last one that Dream finds, however, catches his eye.

It, in varying shades of blue and bold brush strokes, depicted what was of, presumably, a king in an empty throne room, crown tilted slightly to the right and delicate hands holding his head in his palm, eyes dead and bored. The figure looked alone, lonely, and the cool colors matched how blue the king seemed.

Dream's eyes travel to the tag underneath the frame.

The Unfound King.

Even if the painting did not fit the criteria of 404's painting, Dream finds himself wanting to take home the artwork anyways, carefully detaching it from the wall and cringing when the sound of the frame against the floor makes a loud *click*.

Apparently, the security guard also hears of it, because there is the rapidly approaching sound of footsteps, and Dream freezes before sketching out a quick plan.

He steps out of the room, painting in one arm and brochure in his other hand, long legs moving fast underneath him as he takes quick turns. His shoes make more noise than he prefers, and he opts to slide down the golden railing of the steps instead of the stairs, wincing as the frame of the painting

digs into his sides.

“Who’s there?” A loud voice echoes, and the sudden flash of light landing on Dream’s figure has him freeze, if only for a moment. He slowly turns.

“Hi.”

“Hold it right there,” the security guard calls, as if any reasonable criminal would actually listen, and begins to quickly descend down the stairs. Dream spares no time to carry the painting across the large room, feeling the security guard gain on him as he hurries towards the glass doors.

He pushes them open, fresh air hitting his mask as he runs out of the art gallery and continues down the street. The sight was probably ridiculous; a masked figure carrying a large painting down the street as he’s chased by a security guard.

When he looks back, the security guard feels miles away, and he whoops, slowing down.

Letting out a loud cheer, Dream takes home the painting.

The painting is perched against his desk, now, and Clay grins every time he looks at it.

It’s in the company of the other two paintings, both that definitely cost more than he’d like to think about, considering they were now both in his dump of a bedroom, messy from the stress of a college student.

He’d also not like to think about how he has to see 404 in less than forty-eight hours, or that he has an exam in less than five, or the fact that Sapnap had accidentally spilled coffee on Clay’s favorite hoodie, which he had been borrowing, and that the stain was refusing to come out. In all clarity, Clay did not like to think about a lot of things.

Unfortunately, he has to think about *this*.

Sapnap begins, “If you want my honest opinion,” *Clay does not*, “I think that one is probably it.” He gestures to the painting of the half-black half-white figure, *Forgetful*, and Clay makes a noise of acknowledgement.

“I have nothing to go off of.” He twists in his bed, blanket curling around his middle, and he kind of wants to perish. “He gave me no other hints. What else am I supposed to do? *How* am I supposed to figure this out?”

Sapnap shrugs, making an *I don’t know* noise. “What if you just show up with all three of them?”

Clay considers it, but only for a millisecond. “Then I’ll look really dumb.”

“So nothing’s changing, then.”

Sapnap gets hit in the face with a pillow. He deserves it.

They both stare in silence at the paintings, considering, as the clock ticks to five a.m., and some seed of dread forms in Clay’s stomach at the thought. He thinks if George is awake right now. Probably. His fingers itch to text him, suddenly.

“Why did I take up this stupid mission,” he whines, rolling over in his bed.

Sapnap offers no sympathy as he continues eating his Oreos. "Entirely your fault, man."

There was nothing to quite offer clues to which was 404's; Clay has no clue what sort of artist the art thief was, or if they had painted any of these at all. A small, nervous part of him wonders if he had completely missed the mark on these paintings, but he tries to ignore it.

"Alright, dude, I've got a class at ten, so you're going to have to be on your own for this one," Sapnap pats his head as he stands up from the floor, where he had been leaning against the bed frame, Oreo pack in hand. "Use that big brain of yours."

Clay groans in response, and watches Sapnap disappear into the hallway, shutting the door behind him.

He turns back to the paintings, and the paintings all look back, unblinking.

On the far left is *The Unearthed Tyrant*, where the insane expression of the man stares distantly, and Clay wonders what the painting could possibly mean. It seems like some sort of social commentary upon *something* to do with leadership, but he couldn't be quite sure if it was particularly about royalty, despite the crowns crowding around his feet like discarded trophies.

In his opinion, that one seemed least likely to be 404's; the almost careless-yet-confident paint strokes and hurriedness of it didn't seem like something 404, who was often calm and never so hurried, would paint. That was not to mention the ambiguity of it; Clay would not be able to tell if the man was a king, tyrant, president, or none of the above if he was held at gunpoint. Some part of him wishes he was. Maybe then he wouldn't have to take his exam tomorrow.

The far right painting is *Forgetful*, with purple flowers and a peaceful king, or prince, by how young he looked. Clay wants to jump into the painting, with how at peace the figure looks, laying in a purple flower field, book to his chest and crown perched on his head. This one, Clay supposes 404 could have painted, with such smooth yet short strokes, hesitant in many aspects, such as the flowers and the book. Clay would guess the artist to be reluctant to paint beautiful things.

In the middle sits *The Unfound King*, which Clay is a fan of. This one he is sure of being a king, with the crown and leaned-back posture on the throne, if the title itself was not enough to go by. He wasn't quite sure what sort of message was being portrayed in the bored, lax expression of the king, the carelessness in how he holds himself, how he seems like he would not blink if someone stripped all the power away from him.

The style of it, unnaturally, seems so familiar to him, as if he'd seen it before, like a word that he can't quite place. Clay, ashamedly, almost hopes that this one is 404's; he likes the fluid brushstrokes, the smoothness of it, the confidence that radiates from it, like the painter knows each layer of paint will end up making the painting better.

He likes the shades of blue, how they remind him of the sea and blue hours, right before the sunrise, spent with George at the diner.

George, Clay thinks, and flops onto his back. His mind, naturally, quickly spirals as he thinks about the waiter - who he had, disappointingly, not seen almost all week.

The last time they had spoken had been an early morning, when the sun was barely awake and the air was cool enough to wear a sweater without drowning in sweat. Clay hadn't had a mission that day, merely staying up to catch some time alone with George at the diner, over a plate of food while they spoke, and it was entirely worth the lack of sleep when Clay had offered to walk George home, who had easily accepted.

That was becoming a thing of theirs, now; Clay asks to walk George home every morning, and George accepts each offer. Even if the walk back to his own home was double the amount of time it usually takes, Clay never regrets missing so many hours of sleep.

He does remember how George had looked that morning, the constant, light blush on his cheeks as he laughed softly. If he could, Clay would capture his laugh in a mason jar, place it on his shelf for safekeeping.

("Of course you'd prefer vanilla over chocolate," George had rolled his eyes, a slight smile on his face despite it.

"What is *that* supposed to mean?" Faux offense coated his words, and Clay tried to ignore how their shoulders brushed with every step. He was desperately attempting to stay cool. Calm. Collected. He was failing.

George shrugged, incoherent words as he mumbled, "I don't know. You just look like a vanilla-type guy."

Clay raised an eyebrow. "Vanilla is *good*. It's not my fault you have no taste." Maybe they could go on an ice cream date of sorts, where they share an ice cream cone like in the movies. He pushes the thought aside before he entertains it any longer and thoroughly combusts. When did he become so *sappy*?

"I am *not* the one with no taste," George protested, pushing at his shoulder faintly, and Clay's skin had tingled at the contact. "Don't you like pineapple on pizza?"

"It has been weeks, please, I swear it tastes good," he insisted, and George didn't respond, instead almost tripping over and into the road when he stumbled over a broken sidewalk.

Clay was quick to catch his hand, tugging him back onto the sidewalk and a little closer than before. "Oh - my God," George huffed, steadying his pace as he composed himself. "Why are the sidewalks so bad?"

"That's the universe telling you that pineapple on pizza slander won't be tolerated," Clay told him, and George shook his head, a small smile on his lips, and he had been almost aghast at the sight.

Clay couldn't focus on anything other than the fact that they were still holding hands, slightly adjusting so they'd be properly entwining fingers. George's hand was cool in his grip, smooth skin under his own calloused palm, and barely smaller.

Clay was always a sucker for the clichés, so maybe he imagined it, but their hands seemed to fit perfectly together.)

At the thought of George, he turns to his wall, where he had hung up the painting he had gotten from him. Clay still finds excitement blossoming in him at the sight of it, and the idea that *George* had thought him interesting enough to paint, to think about and paint for. That he had given it to him at all.

Call him in love, but the painting was probably his favorite thing in the world at the moment.

He stares at the painting some while longer, until he worries that he'll somehow burn a hole in it with how intense his stare is, and turns to his side, looking back at the paintings.

Clay's eyes jump from one painting to the other, exhaustion wearing at the edge of his eyes, until he yawns. He looks at the purple flowers, the blues of the king, the crowns on the ground, the

purple flowers, the blue of the king, the crowns, the flowers, the king.

His eyes linger on the king, mentally tracing the smooth lines of the king's face, and the broad brushstrokes of the background, delicate and confident in the king's eyes, mouth, crown. It just seems so awfully *familiar*.

Clay's thoughts drift as he gazes at the artwork. He has so many assignments due next Thursday, and the exam tomorrow, he doesn't even want to think about right now, despite being just a few hours away. He was an *English* major, he has no idea why he had to know anything about numbers.

He twists onto his back, and looks at George's painting. The delicate forming of the red petals, the broad, long strokes of paint of the background. He yawns, again.

God, his bed is so, undeniably uncomfortable, and Clay moves to his side again, unable to find a good position to fall asleep to. He looks at the purple flowers, then skips to the blue king. He stares.

Something in Clay prods at his mind, and he finds his own body moving out of his accord when he gets out of bed, the mattress groaning under the shift when he makes to take George's painting off the wall.

He places it onto his bed, and leans over to grab *The Unfound King*. Feeling more than a little ridiculous, he steps back, calculating as he glances between the two paintings.

The similarities between the shaping of a face, the same swoop when it comes to painting hair, the small dents placed in the ears. He tries to ignore the growing feeling of realization when he keeps looking between them, finding more similarities than he'd like.

Clay *probably* wasn't going crazy. Probably.

His mind, involuntarily, goes back to when he had chased 404 until the other had to leave for the sake of not missing whatever he had set those stupid alarms for, how George had seemed rushed and out of it when Clay had seen him in the same night. The fact they were both artists. That the art just seems so very similar. That 404 always leaves just before George's shift starts.

God, nevermind, maybe he *was* going crazy, jumping to such conclusions, but his mind won't stop outlining the similarities; the way they both had the same laugh, the same flustered insults whenever he says something a little flirty, the way they both turn pink at his words. They were both quick-witted and fast to respond to jabs with a better comeback, and whenever Clay poked, they both prodded.

Clay freezes as his sleep-deprived mind clicks into place. He laughs a little out of disbelief, probably seeming like a crazy person as he brushes his hair out of his face, stepping back from the paintings.

He glances back at the artworks, and blinks, hands dropping to his sides as he breathes in, heart racing as he slowly lets himself actually think the words.

George was the anonymous artist.

George had painted this.

George was 404.

Chapter End Notes

if anyone can guess what the purple flowers are, that would b pretty cool (hint! it has to do with ranboo)

this week was quite difficult, so i do apologize if this chapter seemed to have been posted later than usual! i know i usually post in the mornings:(

on another note, fearfully, the next chapter is the last one!! how time flies by D:

as always, if u would like, feel free to comment, kudos, and u can see me [here](#) or [here!](#)
:)

the waiter

Chapter Summary

Maybe Dream has always been lucky, in his abilities and bouts of coincidence, but -

Chapter Notes

TW/**gun
happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Clay was a lot of things, but he was not a panicker.

In the face of fear, he knows how to deal with pressing situations, and, with strikes of great brilliance, he was able to get out of the most troubling situations and could all-around be considered a rather smart thinker. Dream, of course, would not be as revered as he is if he was a *panicker*, who panics and does not know what to do.

That being said, Clay was panicking, and did not know what to do.

“Dude, I think you’re freaking out about this way too much.”

Clay’s neck almost snaps with the speed it turns to look at Sapnap, who doesn’t look up from his phone. Beside him sits Patches, silently swishing her tail from side to side and purring under the petting hand of Sapnap’s. Clay motions for her to come to him while she gazes at him, unmoving. Traitor.

“I’m not freaking out.” He was freaking out.

Sapnap glances up and raises an eyebrow. “Yeah, right. You’re, like, pacing up and down, and it’s making me nervous.” When Clay doesn’t cease his pacing, he sighs. “What’s the big deal anyways?”

“The big deal,” he begins, “is that the criminal that I’ve been attempting to recruit for the past few months was actually the cute waiter that I am essentially in love with, and now I don’t know what to do because how am I supposed to tell him that I know that he likes to steal priceless art in his free time?”

Sapnap slowly blinks. “Like that.”

“Oh my God, that’s a terrible idea,” Clay groans, flopping onto the couch beside Sapnap, who pats his head softly. Clay shoves his face into the sofa cushion, attempting to push away any thoughts occupying his mind. Why did he have to be capable of *thinking*?

He turns his head as to not suffocate, which doesn’t seem like a bad option all of a sudden, and accidentally makes eye contact with the offending painting, which he had promptly moved out of

his room and into the living room. The gift of a painting that George had given him sat right next to it, and the similar art styles were growing to be more obvious the longer he stared.

Clay shoves his face back into the sofa cushion. If he suffocates, so be it.

“Why don’t you just tell him? Be like, *‘Oh, Georgie my beloved, I am so in love with you please kiss me immediately before I die because of how cute you are. Also, I know that you’re a prioritized criminal’*. Foolproof plan.”

He doesn’t know why he tolerates being around Sapnap. “If I didn’t like the feeling of your hand running through my hair, I would kill you right now.”

Sapnap snickers. “Ha. Catboy.” A pause. “Or maybe dogboy with catboy tendencies.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Clay says, and sits up, rubbing the side of his face with a hand, the couch pattern imprinted onto his right cheek. Goddamn it. “Maybe I could just avoid him forever. Or disappear off the earth.”

“Or you could act like a normal human being and deal with this like a proper adult.”

Clay slowly turns to him. “What normal person is in this predicament?”

This has Sapnap pause. “Yeah, okay.”

Shortly after coming to the realization that 404 had been George this entire time, and that the aforementioned probably knows about Dream being Clay, he had awoken Sapnap before he had done something he regretted. Like throwing himself out the window, which was still entirely appealing.

Now he sits, trying very hard not to call up George and ask if he knows, because he *does*, probably. George was smart in more ways than one, and it definitely wouldn’t have taken him long to realize that Dream and Clay were one and the same, because really, Clay was the most obvious person around. It only took Sapnap a week and a half to piece it together.

He reaches for his phone, before remembering that Sapnap had confiscated it, in fear of Clay doing something irrational, which was *stupid*, because he wasn’t going to do anything irrational. He was merely going to call George and ask if he had stolen any million-dollar artworks recently, which - nevermind. Maybe Sapnap had a point.

“I could always just perish,” Clay muses to the ceiling. Sapnap makes an acknowledging noise. “Like, just cease to exist. Maybe I could spontaneously combust. Did you know that there was this old lady whose body, like, set itself on fire?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Maybe I could be like her. Her skull ended up the size of a teacup, though.”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t want people to think my skull was the size of a teacup after I die. Quackity would never let me live it down. Well, technically, he doesn’t have to.”

“Right.”

“Because I’d be dead.”

Sapnap lets out a long, suffering sigh, and clicks his phone, screen turning dark. “Dude, how about I just tell him for you?”

“No, absolutely not!” Clay surges upward and grabs his phone out of Sapnap’s hand, who rolls his eyes. “If anyone is telling him, it’s going to be me, even though I’m pretty sure he already knows, but we need to have, like. A proper confession scene.”

Sapnap nods. “Yeah, maybe you guys could have a dramatic confession in the rain and then French-kiss at the end.” When Clay wistfully sighs, he groans. “I was *joking*, holy shit, man. You’re down bad.”

He can’t even find himself to care. Looking at the time, a glowing 8:34 *a.m.* staring back at him, he holds back his frustration. He’d have to see 404 in less than forty-eight hours, and Clay had been planning on meeting up with George at his apartment after his exam, as something to look forward to, but now the thought of it makes him incredibly nervous, and he places his slightly sweaty hands in his pockets.

He has a college exam in less than two hours. He has to see 404 in less than forty-eight hours. Clay is going to have to pull through for the next two days. Clay is barely pulling through right now.

“You’ll be fine,” Sapnap assures him, and pats his head, as if to further convince him. It kind of works.

He breathes out, in, and back out, and swallows the odd feeling of anxiety in his throat. He nods.

“Yeah,” Clay huffs. “I’ll be fine.”

Eight hours later, Dream is anything but fine when he nearly dies for the third time this week.

“Just leave us be, and there’ll be no trouble,” the incredibly muscled man tells him, holding a gun up to Dream, who reconsiders everything that had led him up to this moment.

Apparently, the owner of the house had a crazy ex-boyfriend who had come by to drop off a few things that she had left at his house, but instead of a box full of knick-knacks and hoodies, he had pulled out a gun. Typical.

The lady had then called the cops, and when realizing that the police were taking far too long to arrive, had called Dream, who showed up promptly two minutes later. As a result, he now stands at gunpoint as he surrenders himself. He also surrenders his willpower, at this point. This day was forming to be much more exhausting than he had planned. It wasn’t even five o’clock yet.

“To be fair, there was already trouble when your ex-girlfriend called me,” Dream points out, and regrets it almost immediately. Why he thought it a good idea to egg on a man who also has a gun was beyond him. Although, it *would* save him a lot of misery, but tomorrow was Quesadilla Thursday. Death would have to wait for Friday, apparently.

“Your snarkiness won’t work on me.” The man shifts and steadies his hold. “I know how you superheroes are. All of you are the same. Always going for the damsel in distress, never helping out the big guy, huh?”

Dream pauses. This guy had one too many generalizations. “I quite literally have no idea what you’re talking about.”

"I'm sure you don't," he scoffs, inching closer. "You superheroes, always leaving people like me behind. Claiming to help people, but you never do, do you? Helping people, yeah right," he growls. "Where were you when *I* needed helping?"

Dream steps backward as the man keeps walking closer, awkwardness filling his bones as he tries to figure out what to say. "Um," he expresses eloquently.

"Where were you when I was just a little kid?" The man growls, voice breaking.

He squints. "Are you about to cry?"

"I was only seven, man, I couldn't hold myself up for anybody." The man continues, ignoring Dream as he goes on his own monologue. He seems to be getting increasingly angrier, raising the gun. It doesn't help that Dream's back suddenly hits the wall, and he's essentially trapped. He is not having a good day.

This man looks beyond older than him, and mentioning that Dream was probably before conception when this man was seven seems quite relevant at the moment.

"Look, man, I'm sorry about whatever," he gestures with a hand, subtly leaning to the small table to the right of him, "unresolved trauma you have going on, but I could recommend you some good therapists around this neighborhood? I'm just some guy, you know, I've never even -"

"But you're *not* just some guy!" The man shouts, and his finger curls and nearly pulls the trigger when Dream leans over and smashes a flower vase against the side of his head.

Almost comically, the man topples over and drops the gun. Dream is quick to bend down and pick it up, adjusting it as he aims it towards the man on the ground.

He pulls out his handcuffs. "Okay, then."

That was much easier than he thought, and, after briefly making sure the ex-girlfriend was unharmed, Dream is on his merry way.

He's never been the best with attempts on his life, so he takes this as a sign to treat himself, thirty-six hours before he has to see 404, to a trip to the diner. Time seems to both go by slower than it should be, yet passing by quicker than he realized.

Understandably, he is incredibly nervous; anyone would be, with the leering shadow of how unpredictable their meeting may go. George himself was simply unpredictable in many ways, an enigma of sorts. The thought of this lodging a break into their relationship more than mildly scares him.

Just the mere idea of this going wrong in any way goes haywire in his mind, and Clay has stressed over it for the entirety of today. He treasures what he has with George, and he doesn't want to risk changing what they have for the worse, yet all Dream is, is timed risks. Dream is risky in every way, and Clay has never been a risk-taker. Ruining whatever relationship he and George have terrifies him, and yet it seems unavoidable.

Maybe Bad can tell, because he gives one look at Clay, offers a sympathetic pat to the shoulder and a free vanilla milkshake, which he sips on as he sits across the waiter.

"But the hairdresser gave Rat a great haircut," Bad tells him, showing his eighteenth picture of his dog, who looks exactly the same as the last time Clay had seen her. "I was really impressed, you know, the last one - I don't want to be mean, but Rat didn't look as good as she could have."

“That’s really cool, Bad,” he offhandedly replies. He would feel bad, if not for the fact that this happens every time Clay walks into the diner. He’s pretty sure he knows more about Bad’s dog than he does about himself. He doesn’t know the last time *he* shed on the couch, but he can confidently say Rat did just a few hours ago.

“Hey, I have a question,” he interrupts, and Bad pauses from cooing at another picture of his dog.

“Yeah, go ahead!” He pockets his phone.

Clay chews on his lower lip as he figures out how to phrase it. “Has George ever acted,” he frowns, “*suspicious* to you?”

Bad squints. “Other than being British, not really. Why? Is he supposed to be acting suspicious?”

Clay squints at Bad, and stares for a long while. After a pause, he slowly shakes his head.

“No.”

“Then yeah, no, he’s never acted suspicious to me,” he shrugs. “Why’re you asking?”

“No reason,” Clay is quick to respond. “Anyways, what have you and Skeppy been up to?”

Thankfully, Bad ignores the obvious topic change, and begins to ramble about a new cooking class the both of them have picked up together while Clay slouches in his seat. He doesn’t know what he was expecting.

Looking at the clock, another wave of anxiousness settles over him.

Thirty-four more hours.

Surprisingly, the next few hours breeze by, as he try-hards sporadically at a few games Karl had shown him some time ago, of which are so mindlessly numbing that it serves great distraction for Clay, who has a mind whirring at three hundred miles per hour. Or four hundred and eighty-two kilometers, if George was here, in his own, stupid (read: attractive) British voice.

The thought of George makes him nervous again, his palms itching at him having to see 404 in less than twenty-three hours. It’s almost three a.m., and the other remaining paintings, discarded by the end of his bed frame, stare at him from the mirror.

Sighing, he moves to place them in the living room, amongst the two paintings of George’s he now has in his possession.

The apartment is dark and unnaturally quiet as he walks to the living room, the cold of the floor seeping into his body. For once, there wasn’t the muffled noise of existence from Sapnap’s room, who was currently at either Karl’s or Quackity’s home.

Karl and Quackity.

Sapnap’s boyfriends.

Clay’s “friends” - although he would gladly push them down a cliff for a dollar.

George’s best friends.

George.

He groans when his thoughts flip to George again. It seems like every thought in Clay's mind finds a way to twist to the other; yesterday, he had seen a tipped-over garbage can, with the trash spilled onto the road. A half-eaten cup of applesauce had rolled out as well, and he had been immediately reminded of George's affinity for apple-flavored foods, from juice to Boba, which Clay had learned about from the time that they had gotten bubble tea together.

("Of course you like taro tea," George had said, face full of expected disappointment.

Clay's jaw dropped, and a few pearls had trickled out. "It's *good!*")

Applesauce was starting to lead his thoughts to George. *Discarded trash on the street* was starting to lead his thoughts to George.

Clay vaguely wonders if this is what love is.

Probably.

Six hours later, Sapnap comes home to see Clay on the floor, staring at the paintings with a ridiculous amount of intensity. He looks up to glance at Sapnap, who sets down a bag of food.

"Dude," Sapnap reviews his rugged appearance, "you look rough."

Clay opens his mouth. "Sapnap, have you ever been in love?"

Sapnap pinches the bridge of his nose. "Go to sleep, Clay."

Clay's phone buzzes.

george <3

wanna hang out tmrw?

Before he even processes the words, another text pops up.

george <3

we can play chess

Incredibly tempting, but Clay lets his phone fall out of his hands, and watches as it bounces on his bed and somewhere amidst his bedsheets. He doesn't want to *ignore* George; he would never. At least, not intentionally, and it feels wrong to not respond. He misses George. It's only been a few hours.

He doesn't know what he's going to do six hours from now. His fingers twitch.

In all honesty, he wouldn't be able to bear ignoring George any longer than he already has, which is ridiculous because technically, Clay hasn't been ignoring him at all - it's merely in the aspect that he would definitely have texted George several times today, about his breakfast, his exams, the dog he had seen earlier today, the new song he was listening to.

Maybe it was because Clay was a little obsessed; he just wanted to include George in anything and

everything, and who could fault him? George just naturally made anything *better*.

Almost like the universe wanted to fuck with him, his phone buzzes again, and Clay, being fucked with, leaps up to find his phone in his bedsheets.

george <3

i'll even let you win this time

He groans, spending more time than he should staring at the words, and lets his phone fall away again.

Six more hours.

In the span of the next two hours, Clay reaches for his phone to text back a response eight consecutive times, to which Sapnap, after the seventh time, threatens to take away his phone, and actually does so after the eighth time.

“What if it’s not George at all, and I’ve just gone crazy?” He sits upside down on the couch, hair brushing the floor as he stares at the T.V. Most people look better upside down, actually. “What if I’m just looking for stuff that isn’t there?”

“That’s possible,” Sapnap replies unhelpfully.

“I’m going to look dumber than I already do, and I won’t be able to face him ever again.” Clay can feel all the blood rushing to his head, and remembers a classmate from second grade telling him that his head would explode if he stays upside down for too long. Obviously, Clay is a competent, mature adult who knows that’s not how it works, and instead sits up merely because he wants to. No other reason.

“You’ve got a few more hours, dude, *please*,” Sapnap pleads, “chill out. Go eat some celery or something.”

Clay furrows his eyebrows. “Why would I eat celery?”

“To calm down,” Sapnap responds, like it was obvious. Maybe it was.

He gives him a look. “That’s so stupid.” He moves toward the kitchen anyways.

“You’re going to look stupid when you eat that celery and calm down,” Sapnap tells him, and goes back to his laptop.

And, as Clay eats half their supply of celery, he finds that it, unnervingly, works.

Technically, Clay has two more hours, but Sapnap forces him out of the apartment anyways.

Sapnap, in all honesty, was more patient than anyone had expected, and only breaks after Clay asks if he would be willing to kill him with a Wii setup for the third time.

“Better safe than sorry,” he claims, dragging Clay out the door. “Take this as a chance to practice your speech to him. Don’t drop the painting on your way there.” He pauses, taking a good look at his friend. “Dude, you look like you’re about to throw up.”

404 - *George* wasn't even in front of him, and yet Clay was *so* nervous, bees swarming inside his chest, head, stomach. He swallows. "Can I stay home?"

Sapnap gives him a look. "You'll be fine. Go get your man. Don't implode and shrink your skull to the size of a tea bag or whatever it was."

"It was actually a teacup," Clay lamely corrects, wincing when the door shuts in his face.

The painting is in one arm, mask in the other as he stands in the vacant hallway. No one was expected to be around at this hour, brushing to barely past one a.m. and most of his neighbors asleep, yet Clay has never been more awake.

Sighing, he tugs the mask over his face, and grips the painting tightly in his hold, hurrying out of the building.

Dream leans against the wall, a painted mural behind him as he sighs. His mask is raised over his hair, revealing his face, and he's completely exposed in the empty museum. Now would be a great time for the art thief to arrive, just to get the awkward bit over with.

There is a painted jar, just a few feet away, that was the objective of 404's mission tonight; it looks plain and old, like most artifacts do, with brown paint chipping away at its edges. It was unassuming. He has no idea why anyone would want to steal it. Rich people were weird.

Dream looks up at the overarching glass ceiling, the moon staring back at him. The museum was ginormous in size, and elegant in its own way, with stone walls, marble floors, and tall pillars. It was a few miles out of town as well, and he's actually glad that Sapnap had forced him out of the house as early as he did, with the journey here having taken him more than half an hour.

Still, he's got a little more than an hour before 404 is meant to arrive, and so many thoughts to himself. Dream's mind keeps going back to the painting, which sits an arm's length away from him, hidden away from view behind a display case.

He brings himself onto his feet, unable to sit still, and begins to pace again.

Dream has never realized how much he paced.

Half an hour before 404 is meant to arrive, 404 arrives.

Dream is quick to tug the mask over his face once he hears the slightest of noises from outside the room, and the glass door slides open, 404 stepping into the room. 404 and George, Dream realizes, are both built the exact same - obviously, considering they were *the same person*, but he doesn't know how he hadn't noticed the similarities. Both of them were essentially three feet tall.

"Once again, that mask is still unsettling," 404 takes the courtesy to tell Dream, who wonders how he's never realized how alike both 404's and George's voices are. He was kind of clueless, he was coming to understand.

It is almost reminiscent of their first meeting, where 404 had jumped at the sight of his smiley-mask. *Simpler times*, he thinks. Or maybe not, when they've always had this dynamic. "That's kind of the goal."

“Your goal is to unnerve anyone who settles their eyes on you?” 404 questions, crossing his arms. He’s wearing a hoodie that’s a little too big on him, and Dream is pretty sure he remembers complimenting George in it a few weeks ago. “Awful goal, if you ask me. Makes you entirely unapproachable.”

He shrugs as he bites his inner cheek. “Even better when it’s aimed at criminals I’m meant to lock up.”

404’s fingers tap against his arms, crossed as he stares. “Criminals like me?”

“Did you forget I’m supposed to be recruiting you?” He reminds the art thief, standing up from where he had been sitting.

“Which you’re doing a terrible job of, by the way.” Well. Dream thought he was doing an alright job, considering he had coerced 404 enough to offer a compromise of recruitment, but whatever.

“I mean,” Dream blurts out, “I know it’s you.”

404 freezes, before slowly tilting his head, and Dream imagines him raising a single scarred eyebrow underneath his glasses. “It’s me,” he agrees easily. “Glad to see you’re not blind.”

It’s in the quick, easy quips that George is so very apparent; Dream has no idea how he didn’t see it before, because suddenly, despite the obscured face, George was incredibly obvious about his identity. Maybe not in the beginning, but now, it was painted in bright red, and it takes all his effort not to look at it.

“No, I - found the painting,” Dream confesses, leaning over to grab it from where it was hidden, behind the table holding up an artifact of sorts. He pays no mind to it when he almost topples it over, graceful as he always is.

He reveals it in a lack of gusto, and there are frozen beats of silence as both of them stare at each other - or at least, Dream assumes so. That’s what he’s doing. He has no idea where 404’s eyes are underneath his goggles.

“That you did,” 404 comments, walking closer. Dream is tempted to run away, but his feet seem to be frozen in his spot. He has no idea why his own body is causing his own sabotage, because right now would be a great time to start running. “Impressive, I was sure it would take you a few more weeks.”

“Shouldn’t have underestimated me,” Dream responds, watching as 404 crouches down to meet the painting eye-to-eye.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have,” he agrees, humming as he frowns. “I painted this nearly two years ago. I should repaint it.”

Dream shrugs, trying to force down his nervousness. “I think it’s nice.” *I like anything you make.*

“Well, then, thank you,” 404 says with a small smile on his lips, and a feeling of satisfaction at making him smile flutters into Dream’s chest. 404 stands up straight, and he is so much closer than expected. It takes all of his willpower not to move.

Dream pretends to think. “What was it you said you’d do if I found the painting? Kiss me or something?” He gets hit in the arm. “Ow,” he says, mostly out of courtesy.

“You’re annoying,” 404 tells him truthfully. Dream grins back in response, still staring at 404.

Sometimes he's glad he's got his mask on, when his unmoving gaze on the other would be so apparent.

"Alright, I'll bite."

Dream makes a questioning look, despite the other not being able to see it. "What about?"

He can feel his flat stare through the goggles. "How'd you figure out this was mine?"

Well, fuck. "I," he begins, but never ends, as 404 stares at him. His small smile grows bigger.

"What? Cat got your tongue?" He teases.

"No," he denies, and clears his throat. "I - well, okay. I narrowed down artists and artworks from this list I had compiled of all the artworks from the past three years." He pauses, before continuing, "Mostly because you need to be eighteen to enter any of your art to any local galleries, and you looked around twenty-one."

Initially, he had thought 404 to be no younger than twenty, but he had underscored the mark by three years, since George was twenty-four, and he cursed the man's ability to seem younger than he actually was. He was thankful it worked out anyways, coincidentally.

"You were wrong," 404 informs him.

Dream rolls his eyes. "Well, I know that *now*." 404 gestures for him to continue, and he does.

"There were a lot of submissions from the last three years, so I crossed off anyone who didn't seem like they could be you, and left any anonymous submissions or people with aliases."

404 nods. "Smart. What else?"

"You said that the title had a 'U', so I crossed off any that didn't," Dream recalls. "Also any ones that didn't have to do with kings or royalty. The ones I wasn't sure about, I had to find in person to determine whether or not they could be yours. There were, like, *hundreds* I had to hunt down."

"Your fault for not giving up sooner," 404 shrugs. "And then what? This one was the only one that fit the criteria?"

Dream shakes his head. "No, there was - there were two other ones."

404 waits, and when Dream doesn't explain further, he makes an inquiring noise. "And?"

"And I figured out that it's you," he responds quietly, watching as 404 purses his lips.

"It's me?" George repeats, and he seems to lean closer, inquiring. Clay almost wants to lean in as well, and he does.

When the other doesn't move away, some stripe of confidence wraps itself around his chest, and he swallows his own heart that seems to have jumped up to his throat. "It's you," he confirms. He hopes George knows what he means; he doesn't want to be wrong.

A fragile silence settles, and it is exactly like glass, transparent yet thick in its barrier. Clay has no idea what to say, so he says nothing at all, moving closer until they are less than a few inches apart. George chews on his lower lips, worrying it red under his teeth.

The small collection of birds, butterflies, and bees that seem to have taken residence in Clay's chest are throwing some sort of college party, apparently, because he feels so jittery when his hands

slowly reach up. George stays unmoving, and he can feel the questioning gaze, even under the goggles.

His breath hitches when Clay's fingers meet the white rim of his glasses, those that obscure so much of his face. George stiffens, before relaxing, seemingly now content with having his identity revealed.

Clay is delicate when he raises the goggles above his face, nearly dropping them when George's dark eyes stare at him when they're revealed. They are nearly black in this light. He can't look away from them.

George looks undeniably striking in the moonlight; he was made with the night in mind, it often seems like. Clay is blown away.

He places the goggles at the crown of his head, perched among his tidy, brown hair. Electricity accompanies his bloodstream, raking through his entire body when Clay's hands place themselves on the nape of George's neck, until one cups his jaw, fingers curling under his ear.

"George." He sounds relieved, and it's because he is.

"Well, now I feel weird being the only one without a mask," George lightly complains, and raises a hand to move Clay's mask upward, pushing it onto the top of his head. His hair is brushed away from his face, now, forehead entirely revealed, as well as the rest of his face. He doesn't feel any more exposed as he usually does when George looks at him.

George grins at the sight, and Clay smiles back.

"Now neither of us have masks," Clay says, voice lower than he had intended.

George raises an eyebrow. "Brilliant observation, Watson."

His smile splits to be wider, and he laughs. It's a sight to behold, and Clay tries to ignore how he is clearly whipped. "You know, typically, Watson is shorter than Holmes."

"There is quite literally nothing typical about this," George points out.

"I don't know," Clay hums, "to be fair, we're kind of typical. I mean," he continues, at the skeptical expression on George's face, "a superhero being assigned to hunt down a criminal, only for them to end up falling in love? Sounds pretty typical."

A pause, until George slyly asks, "Falling in love, huh?"

Clay's mouth runs dry of a response. He is so aware of George looking absolutely lovely in this light, and he is very tempted to hold him in his arms delicately, if George would let him.

It is more often than not that he wonders if his feelings are reciprocated; maybe it's the optimist in him that thinks they are. He's caught George staring before, immediately flushing and looking away when Clay looks back, and he, in small moments of bravery, feels a small tinge of smugness. It could have also been the way George gets more flustered than he should at the small, flirting replies Clay blurts out, or the way he blushes when they hold eye contact too long.

He does exactly that as they stare at each other. Unusually, George doesn't look away.

"Can I," Clay starts, and cuts off, suddenly breathless when George smiles.

“Can you what?” He asks, tone playful and voice quieter, seeming to already know what he is about to ask. He’s a little smug, and he should be, with how he has Clay wrapped around his finger.

Clay takes a leap of faith. “Can I kiss you?”

The confidence he gathers pools at the bottom of his stomach as George doesn’t respond, mouth slightly open when Clay reaches up to cup his face. His thumb swipes at the other’s cheek, and both his hands cradle George’s jaw, other thumb pressed under his bottom lip. George blossoms pink at the contact. He wants to tuck away this memory for safekeeping.

“Can I kiss you?” He asks again, and leans closer when George stays silent. He can nearly feel the other’s breath on his lips when he asks, for the last time, “George, would it be okay if I kissed you?”

“Yes,” George answers, a blush on his cheeks as he says, “it would be okay. Better than okay, actually. You should kiss me.”

And so he does.

Maybe it is a little dramatic for Clay to swoop in like he does, but he has always been one for the dramatics. It is dramatic how they kiss in the shadow of the overhanging night sky, bathing in the serene moonlight, dramatic where Clay seems to melt against him as he presses against George’s lips, and it is dramatic how George presses back, unwavering.

He cranes his head to the left as George makes a soft noise, not thinking twice about chasing after it, and George’s hands are steady when they hold Clay’s waist, refreshingly cool through the fabric of his shirt when they press gently against his skin. Perhaps it would be ridiculous to say that Clay is a drowning man against George, but he only ever seems to sink when it comes to love, and only moves away when he is in need of air.

George is pinker than he has ever been when Clay looks at him, and he can’t help the rush of fondness that washes over him.

“George,” he acknowledges, moving away, before leaving another kiss to the corner of George’s lips, making an exaggerated smooching noise when he does so. Clay is overly sappy, sue him.

The man in question huffs a laugh, weakly pushing him away. “You’re so weird. What?”

“George,” Clay repeats, and presses two more kisses on George’s right cheek in the same, overly cheesy fashion. He does the same with the left side of his face, and then his jaw, and then his lips again. “*George*,” he says again, as if he realizes it was *George* he was kissing, and fireworks full of happiness burst in his chest, excitement at the prospect of George, *George* being underneath his hands and fingers filling his stomach.

“That’s my name,” he replies, giggling when Clay leans in to kiss at his jaw, “don’t wear it out.”

“George,” he says again, just because he can, and laughs when the other groans.

He pushes at his shoulder. “Are you going to say anything else?”

“You’re so pretty,” Clay tells him, because it’s true, and also because the blush that arises is incredibly endearing.

“Nevermind,” he huffs, “go back. I hate all of this.”

"I don't think that's true," Clay muses, still cupping his face.

"No, it's true," George assures, and his hands fall away from Clay's waist, who immediately misses the contact. He, instead, pulls George closer, who flushes darker. "I hate you."

"I think you actually really like me," Clay says, leaning close to his ear. "In fact, I'm pretty sure you have a crush on me."

"*Who*," George declares loudly, face red, "is feeding you these treacherous lies. I have never felt a positive emotion regarding you in my life."

"You're a terrible liar," he smirks, laughing when George glares at him. "Come on, just tell me you like me."

"Not even a little bit." George seems solid in this confession, and scowls when Clay makes to move away, immediately protesting, "Nevermind, *nevermind*. I - *guess* you're okay."

Clay still doesn't let go of him, because there's no good reason to. He likes George too much. "Just okay?"

"Barely okay," he takes the effort of specifying. "Tolerable."

"I'll take it," Clay says, because he's smitten, and begins to pull George even closer, before pausing. Gleeful satisfaction floods his stomach when he presses his forehead against George's, who raises his eyebrows in question.

"What?"

A giddy smile takes up his face when he exclaims, "You have to join our superhero league now!" He'd nearly forgotten about the deal with how happy he was, staring back at George, who is less than a few millimeters away.

A long groan from the other tells him all he needs to know, which is that George had definitely forgotten about the deal, if the horrified expression on his face was any indicator. "What the hell, *no*, I don't -"

"Yes, you do," Clay croons, chuckling when George covers his face with his hands. "It'll be fun! Think of it as more time you can spend with me." He wiggles his eyebrows, and a muffled laugh escapes from past George's hands. He takes this as a win.

"You're so lame," George tells him as he tugs away his hands. When Clay offers a fake pout, he giggles, "Oh, no, poor *baby*."

He doesn't let up the pout. "You're so mean to me."

George breaks, shaking his head while he laughs, tinkering and fond. "Annoying. Come here."

Maybe Dream has always been lucky, in his abilities and bouts of coincidence, but when George pulls him in to kiss away his pout, smiling against his lips as Clay wraps his arms around his waist

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Maybe, he considers, Clay was a little luckier.

ari made two [art pieces](#) of this !!! it is entirely gorgeous, please let ari know so :)
soul also made two [art pieces](#) :D they're both very impressive, pls go check them out
!!!

hello everyone :] before u go, i just want to thank everyone who has shown any sort of support with this work of fiction ! undoubtedly some of u are the most kindest people, and i am always blown away every time i think about the feedback this story has received
i will always be writing more (hopefully u see more from me soon) and u can always find me [here](#) or [here!](#)
as always, thank u for reading :)

End Notes

feel free to comment, kudos, and u can see me [here](#) or [here!](#) :)

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